

THE MEN THAT SERVED WITH DISTINCTION  
"THE 761ST TANK BATTALION"

A thesis presented to the Faculty of the U.S. Army  
Command and General Staff College in partial  
fulfillment of the requirements for the  
degree

MASTER OF MILITARY ART AND SCIENCE

by

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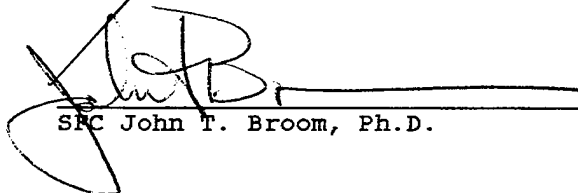
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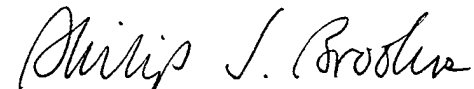
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## ABSTRACT

The Men That Served With Distinction "The 761st Tank Battalion"  
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This thesis evaluates the history of the 761st Tank Battalion from its activation to its deactivation. The battalion was one of the three African American tank battalions established during World War II. The 761st Tank Battalion was the first African American tank battalion to enter into combat. The soldiers in the battalion had to fight two battles. One battle of racism in the United States and the other against a well trained German Army abroad. The battalion fought for 183 consecutive days in the European Theater under horrible conditions.

The analysis showed that African Americans did play a key role in a major war. Once trained, they could perform their duties as well as any other soldier. The success of the battalion was due to outstanding leaders and soldiers both black and white working together to stay alive and accomplish the mission.

The study showed that despite racism in the United States, African Americans were willing to enter into the Army and fight for their country. They were brave, dedicated individuals that trained and fought extremely hard for the rights as a citizen and their lives as a soldier.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

African Americans have played an active role in the U.S. Army since the Revolutionary War. The struggle of African Americans for equality during the period of World War II was overshadowed by other events. The commitment of the government to winning the war left little time for social protest or the breaking of racial barriers. As a result, many African Americans entered into the war because of self-pride and to demonstrate courage.

During this period, discrimination against African Americans was severely noted in industry and in the armed services. Realizing the impact of discrimination, the federal government made provisions to educate and train African Americans. On July 2, 1940 the federal government issued Public Law 703 which stated that there would be no discrimination because of race, creed, or color. Nevertheless, the government provided separate schools required by law for separate population groups; equal provisions would be made for facilities and training of like quality.<sup>1</sup> Employment in the lower paying, less-demanding jobs was rapidly available to African Americans. Despite the availability, however, most African Americans chose not to pursue this employment opportunity primarily because of the types of job being offered. In essence, discrimination continued. The president of North American Aviation said: "Regardless of their training as aircraft workers, we will not employ Negroes in the North American plant. It is against the company policy."<sup>2</sup> African Americans felt the brunt of this type of treatment.

During the early 1900s, African Americans from the South migrated to the northern states seeking better job opportunities. The African American population in New York City increased to 91,000, in Chicago to 79,000, in Philadelphia to 73,000, and in Detroit to 36,000. In other northern cities, it is estimated that an additional 500,000 African Americans added to their population. The migration created serious problems for southern industries. It left huge labor gaps which depended upon African American workers. Thousands of acres of rice, corn, and sugar cane rotted because of the shortage of American laborers to harvest the crop. Cotton fields were left unattended, and the livestock market decrease. The turpentine industry in the Carolinas and milling industry in Tennessee were hard pressed struggling to survive. The situation became so critical that the South's entire economic structure was threatened and suffered.

Discrimination carried on in the Selective Service System as well. African Americans who wanted to enter into the armed forces had to take a classification test. This test was used to place soldiers in different jobs. Considering the economic and social backgrounds and education levels, African Americans often did poorly on the test resulting in their placement in less desirable positions. A mechanical aptitude test was also administered to inductees, and the disparity of performance between whites and most Negroes was greater in this test.<sup>3</sup> Those African Americans that passed the test and met the qualifications were normally placed in service support units.

It was thought that African Americans lacked the technical and tactical ability to lead soldiers in combat. In most cases, African Americans were not presented the opportunity to lead soldiers. The underlying problem was that they had not been provided adequate training and education to enhance their leadership ability before coming to the military.

Once called upon, the United States viewed the difference that African Americans could make in battle. Despite the expansion of black

troops, the Regular Army of 230,000 contained only 4,450 blacks. Most of these troops were in the Army, totally segregated from white troops in housing, training, and combat.<sup>4</sup> The other services, Marines, Air Force, and the Navy, were accepting very few African Americans. Those who were accepted in the other services served as messman and in ground service positions.

There was a great deal of resistance to discriminatory acts among African Americans which led to marches, demonstrations and protests.

These events and the War Department's discriminatory policies against blacks in industry and the armed services caused a great deal of black unrest and protest. A. Philip Randolph, head of the powerful Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, proposed a July, 1941, March on Washington to demand an executive order that would ban discrimination in war industries and apprenticeship programs.<sup>5</sup>

Even though the intent of the march was exercising demonstration through a nonviolent method, President Franklin Roosevelt did not want the march to occur. Mrs. Eleanor Roosevelt requested and met with Randolph to discuss canceling the march. Randolph stood in his beliefs that the only way to end the discrimination was for the president to sign an executive order banning discrimination.

One week later, after Randolph met with the President, Roosevelt issued Executive Order 8802 banning discrimination in both the armed services and in industry. The order stated:

It is the duty of employers and labor organizations to provide for the full and equitable participation of all workers in the defense industries without discrimination. . . . All departments and agencies of the Government of the United States concerned with vocational and training programs for defense production shall take special measures appropriate to assure that such programs are administered without discrimination. . . . All contracting agencies of the Government of the United States shall include in all defense contracts hereafter negotiated by them a provision obligation the contractor not to discriminate against any worker.<sup>6</sup>

Although the War Department felt the vast majority of black soldiers would be more useful in service units, the exclusion policy on placing African American soldiers in combat units was an affront to black soldiers as well as to black and white national leaders.<sup>7</sup> African Americans were willing to risk their lives for the U.S. and wanted to be

on the front lines in combat units and not simply in a service and support role.

The use of Negro ground units in combat presented continuing problems. Negro groups insisted that Negro troops be given a fair share of action, yet commanders were reluctant to accept Negro troops. Lieutenant General Millard F. Harmon, commanding army forces in the South Pacific, argued in 1943 that his logistic problems--long distances and transportation difficulties--demanded only the most effective troops. Harmon's need for personnel was so great, however, that he agreed to use one Negro regiment in combat and to garrison forward areas if white troops were unavailable.

Still, most African American servicemen were forced into labor battalions and used overseas as stevedores even though they were trained to fight in combat. The small number of African Americans in combat units thirsted for the chance to fight against Nazism abroad as they fought against racial discrimination and segregation at home.

The backlog of Negro units in the United States had increasingly adverse effects on morale--particularly when the army began converting combat infantry for service in engineer and artillery units. Negro leaders questioned the War Department about the conversion and Secretary Stimson's reply increased Negro discontent. Stimson asserted that the selection of units to be changed had been based solely on the relative abilities, capabilities and status of training for the personnel in the units available for conversion. He added, 'It so happens that a relatively large percentage of the Negroes inducted in the Army have fallen within the lower educational classifications, and many of the Negro units accordingly have been unable to master efficiently the techniques of modern weapons.'

Stimson argued that 20 percent of African Americans and 74 percent of whites were rated at a first through third grade level (considered the most rapid learners) by army classification tests; whereas 80 percent of African Americans and 26 percent of whites fell into the fourth and fifth grade levels (considered the slowest learners). Stimson's facts failed to mention the direct relationship between levels of schooling and performance on the test. Nearly 75 percent of the African Americans came from the poorest regions in the U.S., the deep South. The southern states where educational and economic opportunities were so limited that four-out-of-five African Americans had not completed the fourth grade. Not to mention, that in some cases

performance by whites from the some region was not much better. On a large scale, white did fair much better, with a high school graduation rate of 41 percent compared to 17 percent of African Americans.

Stimson's statement sparked concern among African Americans. Even though they lacked education and technical and tactical knowledge, they truly believed that they were ready for combat abroad.

The McCloy Advisory Committee studied the problem in February 1944 and recommended in early March "that, as soon as possible, colored Infantry, Field Artillery and other Combat units be introduced into combat . . . and that schedules if necessary be changed." The commitment of Negro units to battle thus resulted from public and political pressure rather than the requests of commanders in the field. Commanders accepted the recommendations only when it was clear that Negroes would be sent to forward areas.<sup>10</sup>

During the Battle of the Bulge, the high casualty rate led to a dramatic call for support from all African American units in the European theater. Approximately 2,500 African Americans volunteers were pooled together in France to begin a six-week course in tactics, weaponry, and battlefield survival techniques. The training was tough for the soldiers. After completing the six-week course, officers from nearby units arrived to pick up the soldiers and transport them to their designated units. The soldiers initially were to be individually integrated into units. Instead, they were integrated as platoon size elements. Though disappointed by the chance, they still remained motivated and enthusiastic about being a part of the unit. Within the mixed units, African Americans and white soldiers ate, slept, trained, and eventually fought together. White leaders were skeptical about integrating the units. Initially, less than 50 percent approved of the integration. Later, the approval rate increased to nearly 80 percent. At one point, in the midst of heavy fighting, a black platoon was so decimated that it had to be augmented by a white squad. The company commander of the unit did not think that combining the two would work. But he was proven incorrect because the unit fought well together.

During World War II, three African American tank battalions were activated, the 758th, 761st, and 784th. The War Department ordered the

activation of the 761st Tank Battalion (Light) on March 15, 1942. The battalion was actually activated on April 1, 1942, when Lieutenant Colonel (then Major) Edward E. Cruise, of Poughkeepsie, New York, assumed command.<sup>11</sup> The 761st was the first to go into combat. General George S. Patton, Jr., stated, "Men, you're the first Negro tankers to ever fight in the American Army." The men of the 761st would have a chance to prove themselves in spite of all the road blocks that were thrown in their path.

Packing bag and baggage the entire battalion moved to Camp Hood, Texas, arriving there on September 15, 1943, with a strength of 42 officers and 601 enlisted men.<sup>12</sup> But their struggle was just beginning.

At Camp Hood, the soldiers witnessed some of the most degrading acts of racial discrimination imaginable:

We as soldiers here in Camp Hood, Texas, are really being treated worse than these German prisoners here. We in the camp stockade are being beaten every day until we can't stand up; drilled all hours of the night. One soldier had a bad case of appendicitis and instead of giving this man medical care he was worked harder and beaten until his appendix burst. Then he was sent to the hospital for operation. Are we still in America or are we over in Japan or Germany? Are we free Negroes, or still slaves?

A copy of this has been sent to the War Dept. Asking for an investigation. Thank you in advance. Pvt. John Rivers, Camp Hood, Texas.<sup>13</sup>

The nearby town of Killeen would not allow any African Americans to reside there. According to Lieutenant Colonel (Retired) Pop Gatos interviews, African Americans were not welcome to the Killeen community. They took a chance of being lynched, shot, burned alive, or beaten. In most cases, soldiers chose to remain on post to prevent them from getting into trouble in the community.

African American men had to fight for the right to fight and they had some help from First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt, prominent African American leaders, and the black press. Mrs. Roosevelt was especially sympathetic to the plight of black servicemen. Early in the war, she announced: "The nation cannot expect colored people to feel that the

United States is worth defending if the Negro continues to be treated as he is now."<sup>14</sup>

After nearly a year of intensive armored training at Camp Hood, the 761st departed, heading for the European Theater of Operations. They looked forward to fighting for their country with hope that their service would help ease the prevalent racism that existed both on and off the military post. After a brief stay in England, the 761st landed at Omaha Beach on October 10, 1944.<sup>15</sup> As quoted by Lieutenant Colonel Pop Gates, "I am proud to say, that I was very fortunate to have served efficiently against the well prepared German forces of World War II. This proves to all that the Negro can do his job as shown in many Negro units committed to combat in World War II."

Even though this was a segregated unit, six white officers were assigned to the unit along with 30 African American officers and 676 African American enlisted soldiers. The 761st fought in six European countries--France, Holland, Belgium, Luxembourg, Germany, and Austria and provided needed tank support for the 26th, 71st, 79th, 87th, 95th, and the 103rd Infantry. They also provided support for the 17th Airborne Division during the Battle of the Bulge as well as the Third, Seventh, and Ninth Armies.

For 183 days, the history of the 761st was one of continuous commitment. When the 26th was relieved for a rest in December, the 761st was attached to the 87th Division, crossing the German border on 14 December, only to lose most of their tanks from enemy action and mechanical failure. Throughout January they engaged in successful actions in Belgium and Luxembourg.<sup>16</sup>

The soldiers of the 761st lived up to their motto, "Come Out Fighting," as they spearheaded numerous advances for General Patton's Third Army. Characteristic of a large, strong, black cat (to become the unit's insignia), these tankers perfected the prowess they had practiced at Camp Hood--the ability to strike quickly, swiftly, and without warning. The "come out fighting" spirit was obvious throughout their participation in four major Allied campaigns through six European countries which include the rugged fighting at Tillet, Belgium, during

the Battle of the Bulge. Truly, the pages of American history would not be complete without official recognition of the average lifespan of a separate tank battalion on the front lines was only ten-to-fifteen days. Such moments like this should never be forgotten. These unsung heroes earned nearly 300 Purple Hearts, 70 Bronze Stars, and 11 Silver Star medals. According to the May 6, 1996 issue of U.S. News and World Report, of the seven African Americans World War II veterans being considered for the Medal of Honor, only one is still alive. It was not until recently when seven African American soldiers that fought during World War II were properly recognized by accepting the Medal of Honor. In 1978, the 761st was awarded the Presidential Unit Citation, 33 years after World War II ended.

Even though plagued by racism at home, the men of the 761st Tank Battalion demonstrated their desire to make a difference. These soldiers took pride in their race, unit, country, and themselves. They worked hard, trained hard, and eventually had the opportunity to fight hard in combat.

Despite discrimination and the lack of education and training, African Americans made outstanding contributions to society, most not noted. The purpose of this thesis is to document the contributions that were made by soldiers that served in the 761st Tank Battalion during World War II.

This thesis will focus on one main question with several subordinate questions that must be addressed:

1. What main factors contribute to the success of the 761st Battalion during World War II?
2. Being the first African American Armored Unit to deploy to the European Theater during World War II, did the soldiers in the battalion prove themselves as effective tankers?
3. What impact did discrimination have on both civilian and military African Americans during the World War II era?



The scope of this study covers the period from October 1942 to December 1945. This period covers the activation of the first black U.S. Tank Battalion in Claiborne, Louisiana, through the deactivation of the unit. This study focuses on the soldiers in the unit, both African American and white soldiers, the roles they played, and racial intervention that occurred. I will also cover a brief period of discriminatory events prior to the activation of the 761st.

The narrow scope of the thesis is due to the lack of public knowledge on the 761st Tank Battalion. Even though the unit made a significant impact during World War II, there is a lack of documentation available. Personal interviews from veterans are significantly relied upon for the completion of this thesis. This study will provide the general public and the US Army a written document on the 761st Tank Battalion.

This study consists of five chapters. Chapter one is the introduction. Chapter two is the unit's organization. Chapter three will focus on the campaigns and operations. Chapter four is a composite of personal accounts from living veterans based on interviews, surveys and questionnaires. Chapter five is the conclusion.

Little is known about the role that some African American units played during World War II. One unit in particular, the 761st Tank Battalion which is rarely mentioned in historical documents. It has been noted that this tank unit fought for 183 consecutive days in the European Theater. Finally, after over fifty years since World War II the 761st Tank Battalion is being recognized.

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<sup>1</sup>Norman L. Hunter, Ebony Pictorial History of Black America, (Nashville, TN: Johnson Publishing Company, Inc.), 248.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

<sup>3</sup>A. Russell Buchannan, Black Americans in World War II, (Santa Barbara, CA: 1974), 72.

<sup>4</sup>Hunter, 250.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., 252.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., 256.

<sup>7</sup>Phillip McGuire, Taps for a Jim Crow Army (Santa Barbara, CA: 1983), 230.

<sup>8</sup>A. Russell Buchannan, Black Americans in World War II (Santa Barbara, CA: 1977), 93.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., 93.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., 94.

<sup>11</sup>Trezzvant W. Anderson, Come Out Fighting, The Epic Tale of the 761st Tank Battalion, 1942-1945 (Salzburger Druckerei Und Verlag), 3-5.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., 9.

<sup>13</sup>McGuire, 218.

<sup>14</sup>Kathryn Browne Pfeifer, The 761st Tank Battalion New York: (Twenty-First Century Books, 1994), 19.

<sup>15</sup>Ulysses Lee, The Employment of Negro Troops (Washington, DC: Office of the Chief of Military History, 1966), 661.

<sup>16</sup>Mary Molley, The Invisible Soldier (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press), 150.

## CHAPTER 2

### UNIT ORGANIZATION

The misty morning of December 7, 1941, the day that the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor, signified the beginning of World War II. United States intelligence sources did not accurately predict the bombing and were surprised that the attack occurred. United States citizens were completely astonished by the attack. The day after the attack, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt went before Congress to ask that a state of war be declared. In almost no time, Congress voted unanimously for war. A few days later, Germany and Italy declared war on the United States, and Congress reciprocated, formally declaring war on those two countries as well.

Even before the attack on Pearl Harbor, there was discussion if America was to go to war, what role would the African Americans play. The debate considered whether or not to place African Americans in armor units to be trained as tankers. Not until the Chief of the Army Ground Forces, Lieutenant General Leslie J. McNair, expressed his support did the Army conduct experimental armor training with African American soldiers. In the early 1940s, a debate raged in the Office of the Chief, Army Ground Forces, as to whether black soldiers would be included in the armored force being created at Fort Knox, Kentucky.<sup>1</sup> Only soldiers who scored above average on their mechanical aptitude test qualified for this training. This meant that very few African Americans would receive the training because they lacked the knowledge to successfully pass the test. This was primarily due to their educational and social background.

The black soldier was mostly assigned to menial and often unglamorous duties like digging ditches, driving dump and supply trucks, sweeping out warehouses and slinging bed-pans in hostels. The War Department and the power structure in Washington, D.C. fostered an attitude that black men did not possess the brains, the quickness or the moral stamina to fight in war, overlooking the documented fact that black men had fought well in every conflict this country had waged from the Revolutionary War through the previous First World War. Even General Patton in his book, *War As I Knew It*, stated that in his opinion, a colored soldier cannot think fast enough to fight in armor.<sup>2</sup>

In mid-March 1941, a selected group of ninety-eight African Americans arrived at Fort Knox, Kentucky, to be the first African American soldiers to receive armored training. These ninety-eight selectees arrived at Fort Knox, Kentucky, and immediately started six weeks of basic training followed by intensive armored training. On May 8, 1941, the unit to which the soldiers were first assigned, the 78th Tank Battalion, was redesignated as the 758th Tank Battalion (Light). This was actually the first black tank battalion.

The battalion relocated to Camp Claiborne, Louisiana, where it continued intensive training and later formed a second black tank battalion, the 761st Tank Battalion (Light). Selected officers, noncommissioned officers, and enlisted soldiers were pulled from the 758th Tank Battalion and placed in the newly formed 761st Tank Battalion. Initially the officers and noncommissioned officers were white until more experienced noncommissioned officers transferred from the 9th and 10th Cavalry Regiments and newer soldiers could be promoted. The battalion was officially activated on April 1, 1942 at Camp Claiborne. Both the 758th and the 761st were assigned to the 5th Tank Group.

A third tank battalion the 784th, was activated in April 1943. Upon activation, the battalion's authorized strength was 36 officers and 593 enlisted soldiers. The actual assigned strength, however, was 27 officers and 313 enlisted soldiers; all 27 officers were white.

Our officers for the most part were white. However, there was a cadre of black NCOs who gave us our basic training; Horace Jones was

one of these men. Our six-week basic training period was a very comprehensive armored introduction. A tank crew consisted of five men and each man had to be able to do another man's job; we were interchangeable in case a crew member was wounded or killed.<sup>3</sup>

One month later, the personnel strength increased by 216 new tankers. The unit received its first set of African American officers in July 1942. The first three African American officers were Second Lieutenant Charles H. Barbour, Second Lieutenant Samuel Brown, and Second Lieutenant Ivan H. Harrison, who eventually became the battalion's first African American commander (see fig. 1). All three of those officers were commissioned as reserve officers after completing Officer Candidate School of the Armored Force, at Fort Knox. The battalion's first commander was Major Edward E. Cruise. In November 1942, he was promoted to Lieutenant Colonel, and shortly afterward he relinquished command to Major John R. Wright, Jr. Major Wright remained in command until July 4, 1943, when he relinquished command to Major Paul Bates, who was quickly promoted to Lieutenant Colonel. Bates remained in command throughout the European campaigns.

Colonel Bates was an outstanding commander. Being born in California, his family moved to Boomtown, New Jersey where he spent most of his childhood years. In the north, as a young adult, Bates did not have much interface with African American people. He later attended Rutgers University, Western Maryland College where he was an All-American football player and after graduating from college he became an oil company executive working in an environment of an all white population. He later transitioned into the Army Reserves where he was commissioned as a second lieutenant in an infantry unit. Bates really did not interact with African Americans until the early 1940s when he was assigned as the battalion commander for the 761st Tank Battalion. The Pittsburgh Courier, a black newspaper during the World War II era, stated that Bates refused a promotion to remain with what he figured was

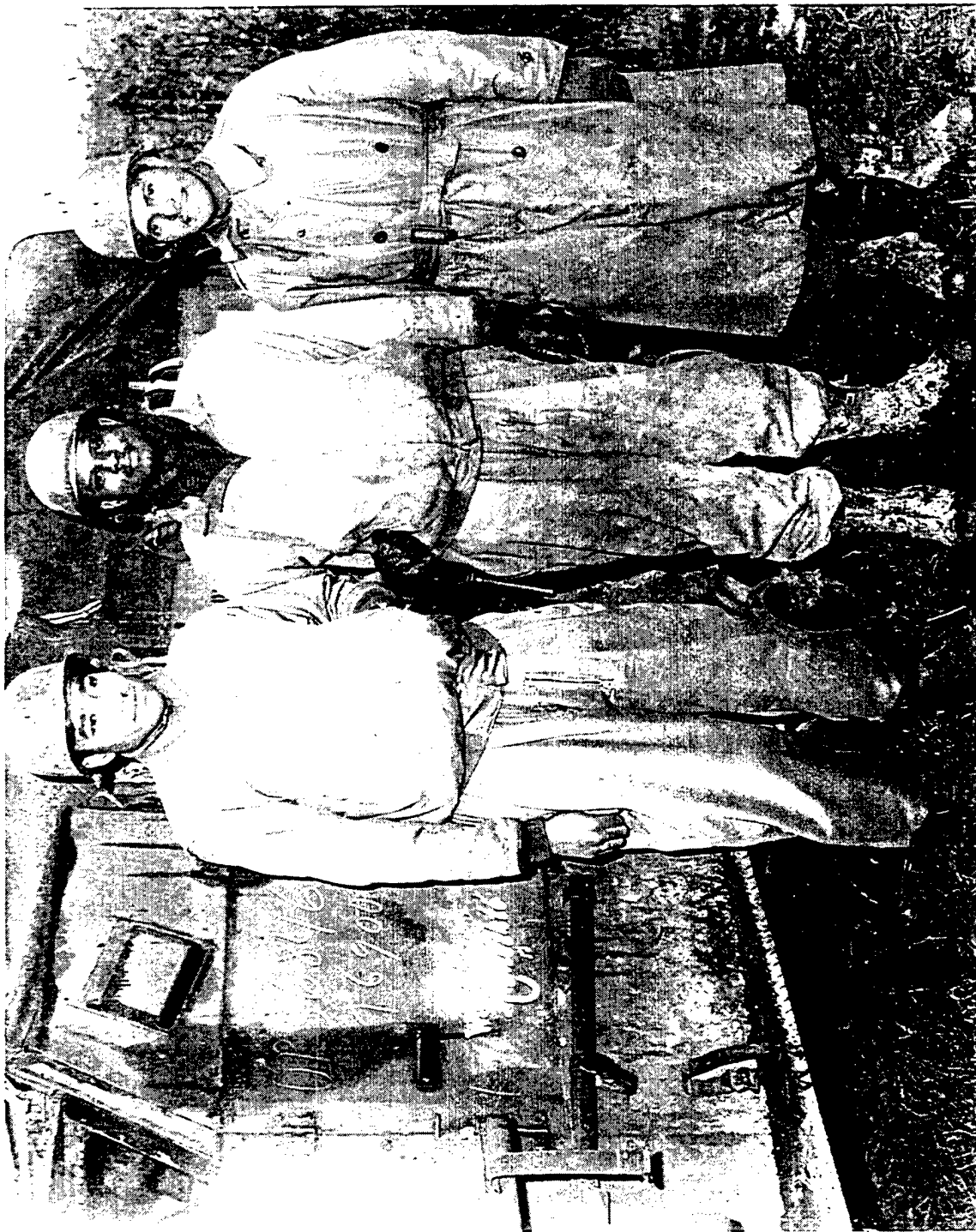


Fig 1. Officers of the 761st Medium Tank Battalion Nancy, France.  
U.S. Army Photo Courtesy of the Patton Museum, Fort Knox, KY.

one of the best tank battalions in the war. The paper also stated that Bates put together an excellent African American unit and prepared the soldiers for combat. He constantly stressed to the soldiers that they were a reflection of him and, if nothing else, they would look good. Because of Bates' affection for his soldiers, he was nicknamed "The Great White Father."

I've always lived with the point of view that the rest of my life is the most important thing in the world--I don't give a damn about what happened before. Let's go from here. And if you're gonna go from here, and you're gonna make it, we got to do it together. So I made a point of being with them as much as I could, for better or for worse. I always lived on the post where we were. And we just sort of came together, where if I told them to do something, they would do it. There were a lot of little things. One was: Hey, you guys are not supposed to be as clean as other people, and there's a very simple answer to that: Make damn sure that you're cleaner than anybody else you ever saw in your life-particularly all those white bastards out there. I want your uniforms to look better, cleaner, than theirs do. I want your shoes and boots to shine better. So they would set up their own tailor shops and everything, and man, we were the best-looking outfit you've ever seen.<sup>4</sup>

None of the three white commanders were regular army officers. They were all reserve officers. Whereas, in other tank units, the commanders were regular army officers with some attending the US Army military academy.

The unit's coat of arms shield was Argent, a black panther's head with his mouth open and sharp teeth and red tongue showing. It was believed that the 761st Tank Battalion shared ties with the Black Panther Organization which was found not to be true. The black panther symbol is not to be confused with the African American group "The Black Panthers." The unit was not affiliated with the organization (see fig. 2). The black panther is symbolic of the functions of the organization. The unit was that of a silent, swift attack without warning from an unexpected location and carrying to a decisive conclusion. Their motto was "Come Out Fighting." This motto was expressive of the characteristics of the personnel in the performance of their duties.



Fig. 2. 761st Tank Battalion Unit Crest. Trezzvant W. Anderson, Come Out Fighting, The Epic Tale of the 761st Tank Battalion 1942-1945, Salzburger: Salzburger, Druckerei Und Verlag, 1945



While at Camp Claiborne, the unit received more African American soldiers to the unit. Located between Baton Rouge and Shreveport, this part of Louisiana was severely infested with water moccasins and racial prejudice. At Camp Claiborne, African Americans were placed in a substandard living area, located at the back of the camp near a sewage treatment plant. During the hot summer months, the smell alone was enough to keep soldiers from wanting to live there. Adding to the problem were the mosquitoes, insects, swamps, and other environmental conditions not conducive for healthy living. One interesting note was that the white officers assigned to the unit truly led by example. These white officers chose to live under the same conditions in the black section as their soldiers. This is one reason why the soldiers respected the white officers.

When McDonnell eventually arrived at Camp Claiborne, he, like the rest of the men in the battalion, discovered that the black section of the base was not only located near the sewage treatment plant but was filthy, smelly, and . . . infested with roaches. Camp Claiborne was the end of the world: Johnnie Stevens remembered. It was hot, swampy, full of mosquitoes, snakes, and anything else you can name. Sergeant Eddie Donald recalled that the black soldiers were quartered . . . [in] the most undesirable area of the whole camp. White soldiers were at the other end of the camp, on good ground with the highways nearby and bus facilities to take them to town. We were strictly and completely segregated. The white officers assigned to the battalion, however, stayed with their men in the black section.<sup>5</sup>

Nevertheless, the troops made the most of their situation, keeping the area clean and dressed up. When the white populace from the nearby town of Alexandria heard that an African American unit was coming to Camp Claiborne with guns and tanks, they were considerably concerned. The whites in the town were afraid that the soldiers would come and bring trouble and violence with them. After the completion of training, the soldiers were allowed to go into Alexandria for relaxation and recreation. Because of the distance, they had to ride the bus into town. The bus system favored white soldiers more so than African American soldiers. Only ten-to-twelve African American soldiers were

allowed to ride on the bus at a time. This presented problems for the soldiers going into town and most definitely coming out of town. On occasion, because of the lack of seats on the bus and time requirements, African American soldiers would walk back to Camp Claiborne.

In Alexandria, as in most towns where there was a military post, there was a black section called "Little Harlem." This is where the African American soldiers would go to socialize. In Little Harlem, there was one bar and one theater. As far as social activities, that was the only outlet for the African American soldiers.

Alexandria was no different from other southern states, the African American soldiers were treated poorly when they went into town. One day, several soldiers were badly beaten by local police for apparently no reason. Several days later an African American female civilian was threatened and struck by a white soldier in the base's Post Exchange. After this incident, word got back to the barracks at Camp Claiborne where the enlisted soldiers lived. Within minutes, the Post Exchange was surrounded by African American soldiers protesting the recent violent incident. Some soldiers got live ammunition and weapons, went to the motor pool, mounted their tanks, and were headed for Alexandria before the white company commander Captain Wingo, from Charlie Company, stopped and convinced them to lay down their weapons and return the tanks to the motor pool. None of the black or white soldiers were punished for their actions during that incident.

As more soldiers were being assigned to the battalion, the unit began conducting maneuver training at Camp Livingston, Louisiana. This training, conducted with a number of infantry units, simulated actual combat for the soldiers, thus sharpening their skills and preparing them if called to fight. Lieutenant General Leslie McNair conducted a personal assessment by observing the maneuver training. At the end of training, he gathered the tankers and informed them on how pleased he

was on the progress. This talk lifted the soldiers morale and encouraged them to train even harder for perfection. Even though training was becoming more intensive, they continued to master the strategic, operational, tactical, and technical mechanics of armored warfare without quitting.

Smith remembers the training regimen at Claiborne and Camp Hood, Texas: It was very intensive. We had so many seconds to get in and out of a tank. You had to learn each man's position . . . how to drive, how to be a bow gunner, how to load, how to shoot. We had to learn position so well that in case anything happened, the bow gunner could drive or the driver could be a gunner or a loader. We had to learn how to take weapons apart almost blindfolded. We shot 111's, 45's, machine guns, all types of weapons. We kept our tanks clean--they shone almost like they were Simonized. When we came back from any trip, you better believe we cleaned those tanks before we ate. On maneuvers, we had combat simulations. We were shooting live ammunition. We stayed out in the rain, we bivouacked, we ate out as though we were in actual combat.<sup>6</sup>

African American soldiers did not receive the best supplies as white soldiers. In spite of the local racial tensions and poor training aids, these soldiers kept pushing forward as if those obstacles were not before them.

Morale was high, condition was excellent, and the members of the battalion went about their tasks with fine spirits, coming through the maneuvers with flying colors. Many angles of mechanized warfare were revealed on the field, under varying conditions, which served to acclimate the members of the 761st to armored field operations in a far more definite manner than could ever have been achieved through the routine training program.<sup>7</sup>

In mid-September, 42 officers and 601 enlisted men, of the battalion moved to Camp Hood, Texas, where the heat was hotter, training more intense, and racial prejudice even more prominent. As quoted by a 761st veteran:

I have experienced prejudice and hatred, Holmes said. The prejudice that occurred to us in Temple, you can't imagine. The veteran told the students at Kileen Elementary School one story in which a black soldier had gotten lost in a white neighborhood in Temple. They cut off his legs and arms and threw him on the railroad tracks.<sup>8</sup>

During this time the unit received a new battalion commander Major Paul L. Bates, who was quickly promoted to Lieutenant Colonel. The battalions' table of organization and equipment (TOE) changed,

reclassifying the battalion from a light to a medium tank battalion. This meant the unit would be receiving the new M-4 Sherman tanks.

The battalion increased from four to six companies. It now included Able (A), Baker (B), Charlie (C), Dog (D), Service and Support, and Headquarters companies. Companies A, B, C, and D were combat units, while Service Company was responsible for keeping the battalion supplied with equipment, ammunition, food, and other necessities. Headquarters Company maintained the battalion's personnel files, but it also provided support with its vehicle maintenance platoon, assault gun platoon, mortar platoon, and reconnaissance platoon.<sup>9</sup> (see appendix 1)

Because of the TOE changes with equipment and tanks, training at Camp Hood was even more rigorous than before. Soldiers had to demonstrate that they could enter and exit the new tanks in a specified time. They had to learn how to assemble and unassemble their personal pistol or carbine weapon blindfolded. Each member had to fully understand the duties of all positions on the tank. Finally, they had to keep their tanks clean at all times (see fig. 3).

When we trained in Texas, the tank crews were taught to aim, to shoot, and to observe the fall of shot before shooting again. Ammunition wastage, they were told, was a sin like buggery, rape, murder or the theft of government property. They were taught to handle each round of ammunition as though it were the only round ever manufactured. Sergeants shouted and Captains lecture about ammunition wastage. Wasting ammunition, it was said, was worse than syphilis or constipation. If you wasted ammunition, you could die, or be caught short. Men wasting ammunition were told not to waste ammunition, because wasting ammunition was worse than murder, rape, theft or buggery.<sup>10</sup>

Even though they were adequately trained, neither the African American or white soldiers thought that they would actually participate in combat.

While at Camp Hood, Lieutenant Jackie Robinson was assigned to the battalion as the morale officer. He was a four letter athlete at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) and future baseball Hall of Famer who would break the baseball color barrier in 1947. One day



Fig 3. Where's the Coffee? U.S. Army Photo Courtesy of the Patton Museum, Fort Knox, KY.

Lieutenant Robinson had an appointment at the hospital. Because of the distance he had to ride the bus to the hospital, he got on the bus with another lieutenant's wife whose skin complexion was light enough that she could pass for a white lady. The rule when riding the bus was that all African Americans were to sit in the last seats in the back of the bus.

That day Lieutenant Robinson and the female sat four seats from the back since the bus was nearly empty. The bus driver subsequently stopped the bus and demanded that Lieutenant Robinson move to the back. When Robinson remained in his seat, the bus driver got up and stood in front of Robinson with his fist quenched and demanded that he move to the back of the bus. Robinson once again refused to carry out the driver's demand. At the next bus stop, the driver got off and reported Robinson to the Military Police. Ten military policemen handcuffed and arrested Lieutenant Robinson, charging him with insubordination, disturbing the peace, drunkenness, insulting a civilian woman, refusing to obey the commands of a superior officer, and conduct unbecoming of an officer and a gentleman.

Robinson was later transferred from the battalion with charges pending. The reason for the transfer was because Colonel Bates, the battalion commander would not support the charges and refused to give his consent--as military law required--to the indictment. Thus Robinson was transferred to another unit, whose commander acquiesced to the wishes of Hood's top brass for a immediate court-martial.<sup>11</sup> The trial was conducted in two phases. The purpose of the first phase was to determine the validity of the charges. The three-judge panel dropped all but two insubordination charges. The second phase was the actual trial which consisted of nine judges. The panel found Lieutenant Robinson innocent of the charges. He did not return to the 761st Tank Battalion after the final trial. But Robinson was transferred to Camp

Breckenridge, Kentucky, where he served as a sports director and later received an honorable discharge from the Army.

The original TOE for a tank battalion was designed for a light tank battalion. In accordance with this TOE, the battalion had its own medical detachment. Because of the fear of not receiving adequate medical attention, African American soldiers were glad to have their own medical detachment. In addition, the battalion had a host of specialized equipment to handle situations on the battlefield. Once the battalion moved to Camp Hood, Texas, however, a new TOE was implemented. The TOE for a tank battalion (medium) included an impressive list of equipment, machinery, and vehicles. But the soldiers in the 761st Tank Battalion felt that even with the new high-tech weaponry they still were not properly equipped for the battlefield environment. This was due to them receiving such poor equipment in the past. "The Army has had the same difficulty keeping our feet warm and dry as it has had supplying and preparing us for battle."<sup>12</sup>

I do not know where the First Sergeant got the boots we wear, but the entrenching tool, the blankets and the rubber gloves are all part of our Table of Organization and Equipment. The TO&E's list of the men, machines and weapons that constitute a tank battalion is detailed and potent: thirty-nine officers, two warrant officers, seven hundred and nine enlisted men, fifty-three Sherman medium tanks, six Shermans with 105 millimeter howitzers fitted in their turrets in place of the 76 millimeter gun, seventeen Stuart light tanks, three halftracks carrying 81mm mortars, thirty-five 2.75 inch antitank rocket launchers, twenty-six .50 caliber machineguns, eighteen .30 caliber machineguns, four hundred and forty-nine .45 caliber submachineguns, two hundred and seventy-seven .30 caliber carbines, three .45 caliber pistols, thirteen M3 halftracks, three M3 ambulance halftracks, thirty-nine 2 1/2 ton trucks, one 3/4 ton command and recon vehicle, one 3/4 ton weapons carrier, twenty-three 1/4 ton trucks, two heavy wreckers, six tank recovery vehicles, and six 81 mm mortars.<sup>13</sup>

The battalion was broken down into six companies. There were three M4A3 Sherman medium tank companies, one M5 Stuart light tank company, one headquarters company, and one service support company. Each of the M4A3 Sherman medium company was composed of four platoons with five tanks in three platoons and the fourth platoon (the

headquarters platoon) was composed of two 76-millimeter Shermans; a single assault gun with a 105-millimeter howitzer; a maintenance half-track and a tank recovery vehicle; a supply and mess truck; and two jeeps, one for the company first sergeant, the other for communications. The headquarters company provided administrative support, command and control and some transportation for the battalion. The service support company provided the mess to feed soldiers, ammunition for their weapons, maintenance for equipment and vehicle, aided in evacuating casualties, and to pass the corpses of the dead to the rear area.

Once in the European Theater, the unit organization remained the same. Because of the high casualties that the unit sustained, they received replacements that were not authorized based on the table of organization from other units, such as engineers, infantry and field artillery. These soldiers were not trained to fight in armored unit, but they quickly adjusted.

After many years of tormenting on whether African American soldiers should be included in the Armored Forces with the intent of fighting on the front lines, the War Department finally decided to allow African American soldiers to train as tankers. This was only after they had successfully demonstrated that they were capable of such a task. This created the opportunity for African American soldiers to be a part of one of the most elite Tank Battalion during WWII, the 761st Tank Battalion. Soldiers joined the unit from all regions in the U.S. But they primarily were from the north and midwest. There was tension between some of soldiers from the south and soldiers from the north. After training, eating and sleeping together, that tension soon disappeared. They knew that they had to rely on each other to be successful on and off the battlefield primarily due to color of their skin.



I viewed the battalion as a test unit to determine the faith of other African American units and the role that they would play in future battles. This battalion was organized with the right individuals. Initially, the battalion received a commander who spent his young adult life in the north and not being exposed to racism and discrimination as presented in the south. This was probably the best thing that could have happen to a newly developed African American unit striving for destiny. Colonel Bates' leadership style set the tone for the rest of the battalion. He made it possible for the unit to develop and train with less racial distracters. The rest of the leadership cadre were all white officers which in my opinion was tough on both the soldiers and the cadre. The cadre established a rapport with the soldiers that lasted throughout the war. As previously noted, the cadre lived under the same conditions as did their soldiers. This blend of unity was needed for the survival of the battalion.

Even though the unit did not receive new or excellent equipment and uniforms initially, they did not let those obstacles hinder them from organizing and training with a vision of one day making it to the battlefield. The soldiers had to make due with issued equipment and at times, share the equipment that was available. This made it difficult for leaders to properly train soldiers after arriving to the unit. Through it all, the battalion managed to organize and become a productive unit on the battlefield fighting both discrimination and the German enemy.

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<sup>1</sup>Armor Magazine, March-April 1982, 30.

<sup>2</sup>David J. Williams, Eleanor Roosevelt's Niggers (Neptune Books, New York, NY: 1976), 5.

<sup>3</sup>Mary Renick Motley, The Invisible Soldier (Wayne State University, Detroit, MI: 1975), 163.

<sup>4</sup>Lou Potter, Liberators (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich Publishers, Orlando, FL: 1992), 85-86.

<sup>5</sup>Kathryn Browne Pfeifer, The 761st Tank Battalion (Twenty-First Century Book New York, NY: 1994), 24.

<sup>6</sup>Potter, 85-86.

<sup>7</sup>Trezzvant W. Anderson, Come Out Fighting, 1945, 9.

<sup>8</sup>Killeen Daily Herald, 5-b.

<sup>9</sup>Kathryn Browne Pfeifer, 34-35.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., 24.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., 127.

<sup>12</sup>Kathryn Browne Pfeifer, 20.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., 20-21.

### CHAPTER 3

#### CAMPAIGNS AND OPERATIONS

On June 9, 1944, three days after the invasion of Normandy, the 761st Tank Battalion received orders from the War Department placing the battalion on alert for possible deployment to the European Theater. For the majority of the soldiers in the battalion, both black and white, this was like a dream come true. They had been training hard and patiently waiting for the moment to actually go into combat. After the notification from the War Department, key leaders dusted off contingency plans and began to conduct predeployment planning. The battalion was allowed adequate time (nearly two months) to conduct predeployment operations. During this time, soldiers received a series of briefings referencing the threat and the area of operation. Soldiers also received the standard vaccinations and uniforms for deploying. At this moment the soldiers knew that this was for real. Some came close to a spiritual rebirth while others demonstrated little emotion. After conducting final predeployment preparation, on August 1, 1944, the advance party departed from Camp Hood, Texas, enroute to Camp Kilmer, New Jersey. Seven days later, on August 7, the advance party sailed to the European Theater. They were not there long enough to properly prepare for the reception of the main body which departed from Camp Hood enroute to Camp Shanks, New York, on August 9, 1944.

The main body of soldiers loaded on trains at Camp Hood and traveled for five days, only being allowed to exit the train at night due to anticipated racial problems. The main body of soldiers sailed

for England on the *H. M. S. Esperance Bay*. Instead of the soldiers riding in the back of the bus they were now sailing in the bottom of ship. While on the ship, it was believed that the African American soldiers would be trouble makers and not obey orders from the leaders on the ship. It was just the opposite. Upon departing from New York, some leaders thought that the African American soldiers were going to generate behavior problems, poor attitudes, and lack of moral discipline. Throughout the voyage, the African American soldiers proved them wrong. The soldiers were well mannered, showed respect for the captain and his crew, and did not present any problems while enroute. The outstanding conduct by the soldiers was noted and passed in a letter to Lieutenant Colonel Bates. Once Lieutenant Colonel Bates received the letter, he in return shared the letter with the soldiers hoping that type of attitude continued throughout the war.

I wish to express my appreciation to you and your officers for your hearty cooperation in making this voyage most successful and pleasant. I commend your unit for its discipline, military courtesy, high morale and soldierly conduct throughout the voyage. It has been by far one of the best disciplined units of its kind on this ship since the undersigned has been Transport Commander. My Staff and I wish you Godspeed in your future missions, and the best of luck and success to final victory.<sup>1</sup>

The 761st Tank Battalion was the first African American tank battalion to arrive in the European Theater of Operations. The battalion arrived on September 8, 1944 at Avon-Mouth, England and was assigned to the Ninth Army Group. This was the beginning of a new and long awaited era for these soldiers. The battalion was sent to Wimborne and Dorset, England. They remained there for several weeks while waiting for their equipment to arrive and instructions on upcoming assignments and missions. The battalion spent three weeks receiving, inspecting, and overhauling equipment. During this time, the soldiers were encouraged to relax and mentally prepare themselves for events to come. Relaxation was comparatively light, for everyone had a full sense

of realization of the responsibility which rested upon their shoulders, for the time was approaching when the late Lieutenant General McNair would either be vindicated, or discredited, for his faith in Negro tankers.<sup>2</sup> On October 5, 1944, the battalion was assigned to the Third US Army where General George S. Patton was the commander. The battalion received orders on October 9, 1944, to pull out of the English Channel enroute to Omaha Beach France, on the Normandy Peninsula.

Upon arriving in France, the battalion was assigned to the 26th Infantry Division of the 12th Corps, Third Army. The battalion traveled over 400 miles to link up with the division. During the course of the movement, the battalion consumed over 70,000 gallons of gasoline, 700 gallons of oil, without any vehicular losses. One tank arrived one day late and this was due to mechanical problems. The division commander, Major General Williard S. Paul, while standing on top of a half-track, welcomed the battalion to the division on October 31.

I am damned glad to have you with us. We have been expecting you for a long time, and I am sure you are going to give a good account of yourselves. I've got a big hill up there that I want you to take, and I believe that you are going to do a great job of it.<sup>3</sup>

Two days later, the battalion received a welcome from another visitor. This time it was the commander of the Third Army, General George S. Patton, Jr. He addressed the battalion in the same manner and at the same location as did Major General Paul. These are the words which were broadcasted to the soldiers:

Men, you're the first Negro tankers to ever fight in the American Army. I would never have asked for you if you weren't good. I have nothing but the best in my Army. I don't care what color you are, so long as you go up there and kill those Kraut sonsabitches. Everyone has their eyes on you and is expecting great things from you. Most of all, your race is looking forward to you. Don't let them down, and damn you, don't let me down.<sup>4</sup>

After addressing the battalion, General Patton continued with the inspection of the new Sherman tanks. He climbed up onto Private E. G. McConnell's tank on the commander side to inspect his new high-velocity

gun. He informed Private McConnell to use his gun and shoot up everything he sees. General Patton's definition of everything was just that, everything; churches, graveyards, houses, old ladies, children, and haystacks.

On November 7, the battalion received an African-American Army War correspondent, Trezzvant Anderson to record and document the unit's daily activities. Trezzvant Anderson remained with the unit throughout its entirety in the European Theater. The only newspapers that would print his articles were the black newspapers. The rest of the world was not concerned about the African American unit's activities. This is one reason why there is little known about the 761st Tank Battalion and other African American units that participated in campaigns during World War II. Trezzvant Anderson later authored a book titled Come Out Fighting which captured most of the unit's activities.

The Third Army received orders to begin offensive operations on November 8. The scheme of maneuver for the XII Corps was to attack with three infantry divisions abreast (80th, 35th, and 26th) with two armor divisions (4th and 60th) as the corps reserves. The 26th Division was the XII Corps' southern division with the 4th Armored Division as the 26th's reserve (See Fig. 4).

The battalion was officially committed to battle on October 31. This is when Major General Paul received orders to take Hill 253. The battalion continued to prepare for departure. After a few days of prepping, the battalion began to move eastward to the town of Athainville, France, the line of departure for the Third Army's campaign in the Saar basin. The battalion was divided to support two task forces. The first task force was composed of the 101st and 104th Infantry Regiments of the 26th Division and Company A from the 761st. The second task force was composed of 602nd Tank Destroyer Battalion, an

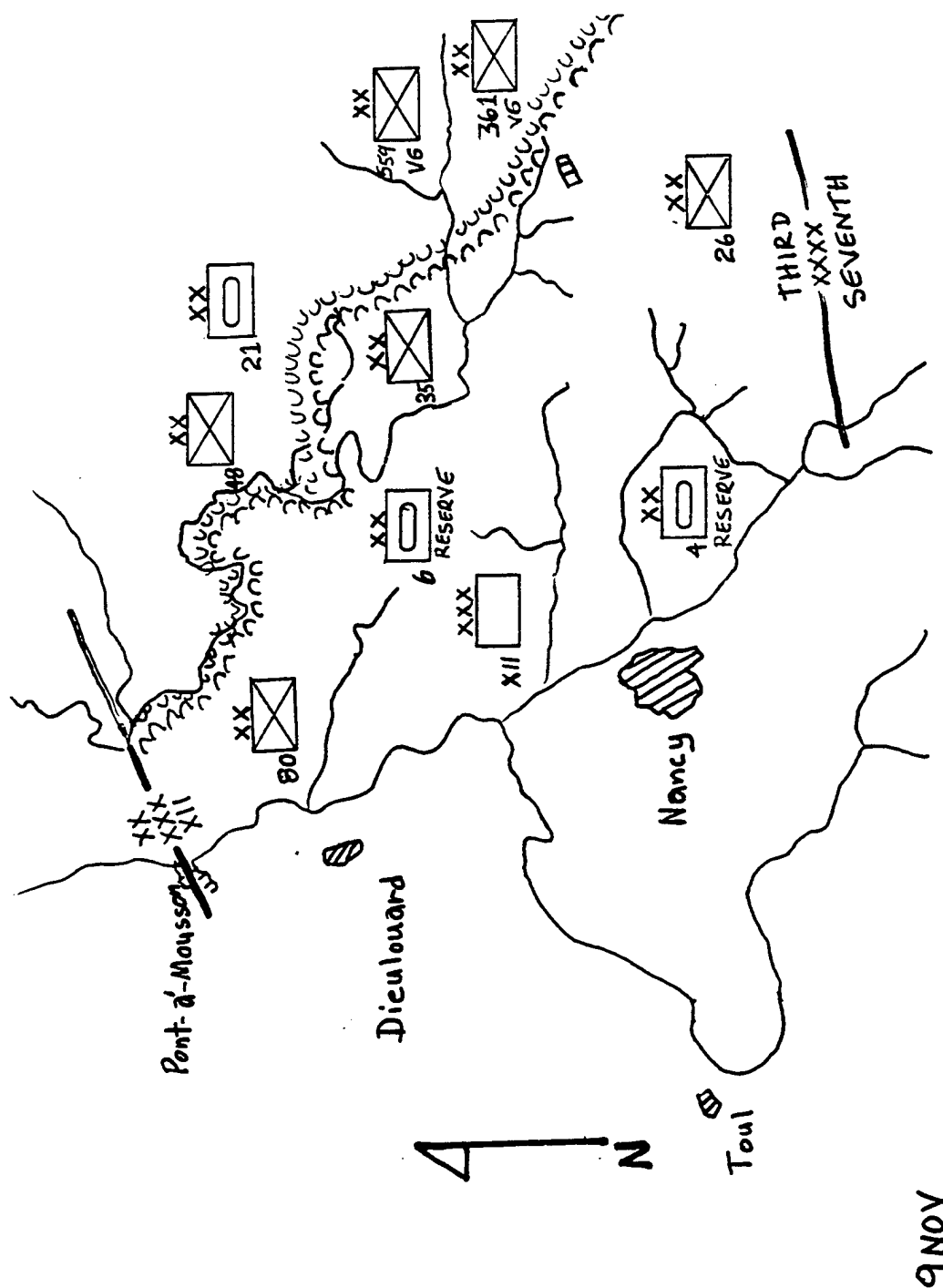


Fig 4. Third Army's Scheme of Maneuver. Trezzvant W. Anderson, Come Out Fighting, The Epic Tale of the 761st Tank Battalion 1942-1945, Salzburger: Salzburger, Druckerei Und Verlag, 1945.

engineer company of the 26th Division, and the 328th Infantry Regiment of the 26th, along with the remainder of the 761st Tank Battalion.

Everybody was scared; only a liar would deny that. But then the job just had to be done, for General Paul had said that he wanted the tankers to take "that big hill up there", and so, after the first few rounds had been fired, and enemy 88s had oriented them, the battle got underway in earnest, and when the day was done Bezanegre La Petite, Bezange La Grande, and Hill 253 all had fallen. But one heluvu time was had all before the sun set on France that 8th day of November 1944.<sup>5</sup>

On November 8, the 761st actually made its commitment to combat. The battalion crossed the line of departure at approximately 0600 hours. That evening, the battalion reached the crossroads just north of Arracourt. Two platoons in Company A made first contact with enemy forces. This contact was made in the tour of Vic-sur-Seille which was named for the river that ran through it (See figures 5 and 6). After conducting a river crossing operation, two platoons reached an area which was heavily mined and they had to fight their way through heavy enemy gunfire. During this time, the platoon lost three tanks which were later recovered. While assisting a wounded soldier, Private Clifford C. Adams was hit by an exploding shell and died that same day. He was the first soldier from the battalion to die during the operation. Staff Sergeant Rubin Rivers, one of the company's platoon sergeants was awarded the battalion's first silver star for his acts of heroism. After being caught in the middle of a minefield, the platoon could not maneuver due to a wire obstacle blocking movement. Under intense and heavy enemy gun fire, Staff Rivers dismounted his tank and attached a cable to the wire obstacle and created a passage way for his unit.

During daylight attack . . . Staff Sergeant Rivers a tank platoon sergeant, was in the lead tank when a road block was encountered which held up the advance. With utter disregard for his personal safety, Staff Sergeant Rivers courageously dismounted from his tank in the face of directed enemy small arms fire, attached a cable to the road block and moved it off the road, thus permitting the combat team to proceed. His prompt action thus prevented a serious delay in the offensive action and was instrumental in the successful assault and capture of the town. His brilliant display of initiative, courage, and devotion to duty reflect[s] the highest credit upon Staff Sergeant Rivers and the armed forces of the United States.<sup>6</sup>





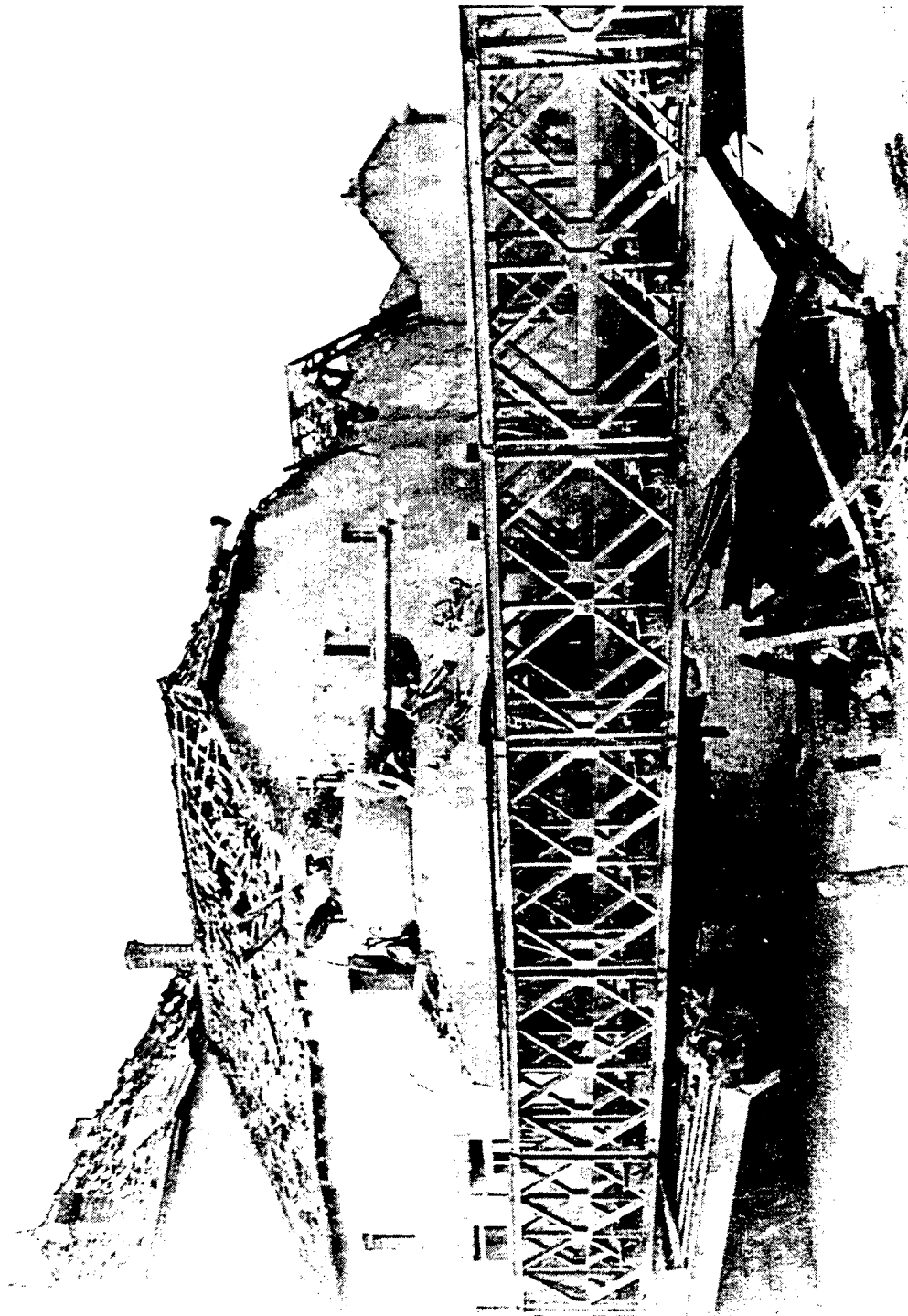


Fig. 6. Moving up to a forward position in the combat zone, a tank from Company A, 761st Tank Battalion U.S. Third Army, crosses a Bailey Bridge in the town of Vic-Ser-Seille in November 1944. U.S. Army Photo Courtesy of the Patton Museum, Fort Knox, KY.

His platoon was the first unit in the battalion to successfully reach its objective.

Company C's mission was to seize Hill 253 and Bezange La Petite. They had twelve tanks at the time and supported the 328th Infantry Regiment. While seizing Hill 253 and Benage La Petite, Company C lost three tanks, five enlisted men were killed and two enlisted men were wounded. Second Lieutenant Jay E. Johnson, was the platoon leader for first platoon. He became the second officer seriously wounded due to a shell blasting in his face nearly blinding him.

On the first day of battle the battalion commander was seriously wounded and was hospitalized, not returning to duty until February of the following year. As described by one soldier:

Lieutenant Colonel Bates, our commanding officer, credited by Lee with the taking of Morville-les-Vic, which was our initiation into combat, was shot in the ass the night before and had to be evacuated. They never found out whether or not he was accidentally shot by an American soldier or hit by sniper fire. The next man in command, Major Wingo, the morning of the attack, turned his tank around and went hell-bent in the opposite direction. He just plain chickened and that s.o.b. was evacuated for combat fatigue. Hell, we hadn't even been in battle yet.<sup>7</sup>

The next day, Lieutenant Colonel Hollis E. Hunt of the 17th Armored Group arrived to serve as not only the Provisional Task Force A commander but also as the 761st Tank Battalion Commander. He himself was wounded but he remained in command.

The following day, November 9, the fighting continued into the town of Morville-les-Vic. Company A continued its advancement to the east of Morville after completing the destruction of Chateau-Salins. Company B under heavy mortar and artillery fire, attacked the town between Company A and C. Company C attacked the town from the northwest. Company D was in reserve providing cover for Company B and the 26th Infantry. The battle at Morville was suppose to be little-to-no-contact with the Germans. During the attack, Company C encountered mines that were placed in front of ditches with pillboxes concealed by

camouflage and newly fallen snow. The company lost seven tanks, and there were ten soldiers killed. Sergeant Eddie Donald of Company B recalled the Battle of Morville as a suicide mission:

We were told by our company commander that they had a little town over the hill they wanted us to take and we were going to spearhead . . . the division. This was the first time I had heard the word spearhead and I really did not know what it meant until the following morning. We were to go in and soften up the enemy; we really weren't expected to come out of it. We were supposed to soften up things so the troops behind us . . . could capture the town without too much difficulty.<sup>8</sup>

By the end of the battle at Morville, there was one officer and nine enlisted soldiers killed and twenty enlisted soldiers. Four of the seven disabled tanks were recovered and later placed back into action.

The battalion continued to move north with Company A staging a counterattack against German forces and seized the town of Wuisse. The battalion continued its advancement to Ham Port to form a single spearhead through Forest De Koecking. During this period, the battalion was supporting the 3rd Battalion, 328th Regiment.

After successfully seizing town after town, the battalion's next objective was the town of Benestroff. Strategically, this town was key for the Germans, due to the railroad network, communications, and roads. By losing this town, the Germans would not be able to adequately sustain operations. To make matters worse for the Germans, the Third Army Division was closing in and conducting an encirclement operation on the town.

Even though the environment was bad and the natural elements were poor, the battalion did not let down. As the battle progress soldiers became confident on the battlefield. They spent a couple of days repairing, rearming, and refueling their tanks before pushing farther on. The next battle for the battalion was in the town of Guebling. On November 18, the battalion seized the town of Guebling. This is where Sergeant Ruben Rivers continued to make a name for himself. As his

platoon was advancing through the town, Sergeant Rivers' tank was hit and disabled. Under heavy enemy gun fire, he climbed out of his tank and got into another tank and continued to attack. On one occasion, his platoon leader transmitted a message to him not to enter the town because of the heavy enemy gunfire.

Don't go into that town Sergeant, it's too hot in there. Quick as a flash the answer came back over the radio, in a respectful voice: "I'm already through that town!" That was characteristic of Ruben Rivers, and everybody swore that he was going to get the first battlefield commission in the battalion.<sup>9</sup>

Sergeant Rivers' protective shield grew thin as the battle continued. The Germans landed two high-explosive rounds to Rivers' tank. The first round wounded the cannoneer and killed the gunner. The second round hit Rivers in the head blowing his brains to the back of the tank. The battalion lost a brave, dedicated, and courageous soldier and leader that day.

From Guebling, the Third Army fought on toward a major strategic and psychological objective, the Legendary Maginot Line.<sup>10</sup> Enroute to the Maginot Line, the battalion, still spearheading for the 26th Division, had to seize a series of towns. The battle in the town of Dieuze was tough. The battalion relied on its mortar platoon to weaken enemy forces prior to the actual attack. After the battle, Major General W. S. Paul stated that he had not seen a better demonstration of these types of weapons before. The battalion continued its attack and seized Honskirch.

27 November one section of assault gun platoon and one (1) tank from Company C gave direct fire support to 3rd Battalion, 328th Infantry in its assault on Honskirch. Mortar platoon withdrew to Munster after firing three hundred (300) rounds at enemy positions in Honskirch, under heavy counter-battery fire.<sup>11</sup>

On December 9, the battalion was slowly approaching the Maginot Line. Company B reached the defense line at Achen and Etting where they were assisted with air support from the P-47s to reduce the pillboxes and plow through. Company A had penetrated through at another location.

Company C was the last company to make its way through the Maginot Line. Now all companies were poised near the German border waiting for further instructions. The battalion, while supporting the 26th Division did an outstanding job. Major General Paul of the 26th wrote:

That battalion has supported this division with great bravery under the most adverse weather and terrain conditions. You have my sincere wish that success may continue to follow you in all your endeavors.<sup>12</sup>

The XII Corps commander, Major General Manton S. Eddy stated:

I consider the 761st Tank Battalion to have entered combat with such conspicuous success as to warrant special commendation. The speed with which they adapted themselves to the front line under the most adverse weather conditions, their gallantry with which they faced some of Germany's finest troops, and the confident spirit with which they emerged from their recent engagements in the vicinity of Dieuze, Morville Les Vic and Guebling entitle them surely to consider themselves the veteran.<sup>13</sup>

On December 11, the 26th Division was relieved by the 87th Division. The 26th Division conducted reconstitution operations. For E. G. McConnell, the memory to these "comrades" is still bitter:

A commander of the 87th Infantry--they were from the South--told that outfit, "I don't want them niggers messin with no white women, and don't you even socialize with them." We were fighting for survival and these were the words he brought out! And they were green, brand-new into combat. Green! And these bastards start talking all this kind of shit! But when it got hot and their lives were at stake, they forgot about the color. They didn't give a damn as long as they could jump inside our tanks. Before that they didn't even want to talk to us, but when the Germans were dropping all that shit on us, they begged us to let them get inside.<sup>14</sup>

The 761st Tank Battalion had no relief. The battalion kept pushing forward. On December 14 the 761st Tank Battalion crossed into Germany with three tank companies. Company C crossed over, going as far as Reinheim before stopping. Company A crossed over and positioned at Peppenheim with Company B following. The battalion received new orders to move out enroute to Belgium where they were actively involved in the Battle of the Bulge.

The battalion conducted an administrative move under severe weather conditions to Belgium. The snow was falling heavy quickly covering the ground with accumulations up to four feet in some areas.

On December 16, the Germans conducted a massive counteroffensive operation along their border. This operation became known as the Battle of the Bulge. By nightfall, the Germans had seized their objective by capturing the town of Saint-Vith and successfully pushed to the Meuse River. The American defenders, members of the 1st Army VIII Corps, handicapped by ammunition shortages and thin manpower reserves, had fought with exceptional courage, sustaining heavy casualties in the process.<sup>15</sup>

The soldiers from the battalion and their equipment were placed on flatcars and transported to the area. This provided time for the soldiers to rest and think about the tough ordeal ahead. As the unit was headed to load their tanks and equipment on the flatbeds, white infantrymen were quoted saying, "Where in the hell are those niggers going with those tanks."

On Christmas Eve, the 761st, now attached to the 87th Division, arrived at Offagne. By New Year's Eve, the battalion had reached its first objective, the town of Libramont, Belgium. The battalion brought in the new year with a bang by capturing two more towns on New Year's Day. Spearheading for the 345th Infantry, the battalion swept through Rondue and Nimbermont fifteen miles east of Bastogne. This battle led to the fight at Tillet on January 5th.

The battle at Tillet was a tough battle for the battalion which lasted for several days. The Germans massed a great deal of armor and an infantry unit to fight this battle. Company D conducted resupply operations for the battalion with light tanks. The weather and terrain was one of the company's biggest obstacles at Tillet. The company had a difficult time providing ammunition and other supplies to forward units. They would transport these supplies in their tanks, and the returning tanks would bring the wounded tankers and infantrymen back (see fig. 7). Company A was the first unit in the battalion to engage the enemy.

Companies A and C were under the command of Captain Gates. A great deal of responsibility fell on the shoulders of several enlisted soldiers and these soldiers provided outstanding leadership which resulted in battlefield commissions. Staff Sergeants Dade's, Cochran's and Windsor's platoons were responsible for knocking out eight machine-gun nests, one Mark IV tank, an ammunition dump, and three antitank guns, thus killing 106 Germans. Tillet will always be remembered, as much for the cold, bitter weather, as for the furious fighting which saw neither side yielded an inch without fighting for it, and staying in there to fight until the finish. The 761st won in the end.<sup>16</sup>

After the battle in Tillet, the battalion was reassigned to an elite airborne unit, the 17th Airborne Division. Spearheading for the airborne division, the battalion cut off German resupply routes at the Liege-Bastogne road. The camaraderie between the white paratroopers and the African American soldiers was outstanding. They blended together as if color did not exist. The commander of the 17th Airborne Division was reported to have remarked later that he "would prefer to have five tanks from the 761st to fifty from any other armored unit."<sup>17</sup> General Patton preferred to bypass Bastogne and go on to St. Vith to penetrate the German salient on its southern flank.

The Ardennes counteroffensive ended in an Allied victory by the end of January 1945. The Germans lost valuable reserves, which could not be replaced. General Eisenhower planned to continue the Allied offensive on a broad front, with multiple axes pushing into Germany. The first axis, the main effort, to the north of the Ardennes to capture the Ruhr industrial region, and the second axis to the south of the Ardennes to capture the Saar industrial region. The Allies advanced to the Rhine River pushing the Germans east.<sup>18</sup>



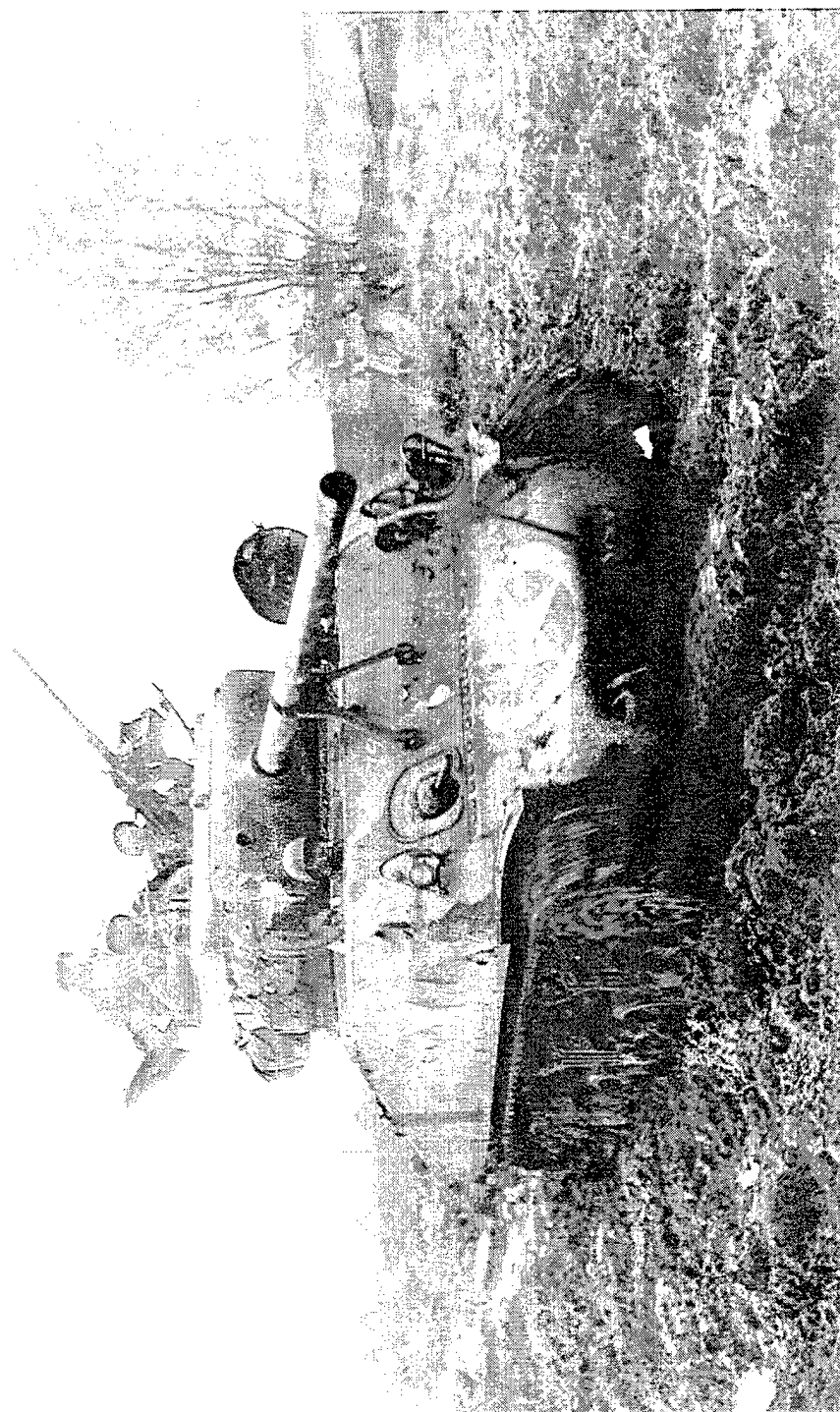


Fig 7. What Happened to the Road M4 Medium Tank heading for Nancy, France 1944. U.S. Army Photo Courtesy of the Patton Museum, Fort Knox, KY.

In February, the battalion received orders to move into Jabeek, Holland, on the German border. During this period, the battalion was briefly attached to the 95th Division of the XVI Corps then it was attached to the 79th Infantry Division. The XVI Corps' mission was to hold a line along the Maas River and wait for the Ninth Army's push to the Rhine River. The Allied offensive continued on February 23d with the 761st in support of the 79th Division.<sup>19</sup> The 761st participated in the capture of End, Holland, with the 314th Infantry Regiment.

The unit received over two hundred new replacements. These replacements came from all types of units. The new replacements had very little knowledge on how to fight with tanks. For that reason, a special two-week armor training course was designed to enhance their combat skills.

On February 17, Lieutenant Colonel Bates returned to the battalion as the commander after a long stay in a hospital in Great Britain. He fully recovered from a wound that was sustained in early November 1944. After his return, the battalion moved from Jabbed, up to Millet, near the Roermond-Julich railway where they cut the Roermond-Julich railway line before moving on to Erkleinz.

The battalion formed three task forces with the 79th Reconnaissance Group and moved to Kipshoven. The purpose for forming the three task forces was to relieve and pressure on the Ninth Army's operations at Julich or Geienkirchen. At this time, their mission was to conduct diversionary attacks along the Roer River.

The battalion received orders to move to Saverne, France. While moving, the battalion received additional orders assigning the unit to support the 103rd Infantry. They fought with the 103rd capturing the towns of Niederbronn, Lembach, and Boenthal. Now, closing in on the Siegfried Line, the battle was getting tougher. The Germans defense presented stiff resistance which slowed down operations for the Allies.

The battalion received the mission to penetrate the Seigfried Line and move to the Rhine River with a be prepared mission to attack towards Bobenthal in the Hardt Mountains. At this point the task force "Task Force Cactus," consisted of the 761st, the 2nd Battalion, 409th Regiment, 103rd Division, a detachment of combat engineers, and a reconnaissance platoon from the 614th Tank Destroyer Battalion.

As Task Force Cactus plowed through the towns of Reisdorf, Silz, Munchweiler, Klingenstein, and Insheim they ran into a well-prepared enemy front. The enemy opposition was stiff and exhibited no signs of quitting.

In that big drive the 761st had its part, and it was not one of the minor roles, but definitely a major one, for the 761st was to crack that Siegfried Line itself! It was to do what the 14th Armored had failed to do, and that would pave the way for the moving of the Seventh Army front in that area, to keep pace with the movements in the rest of the line.<sup>20</sup>

On March 21st, the 761st became a part of Task Force Rhine commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Bates. The task force consisted of the 761st, 2nd Battalion of the 103rd's 409th Regiment, a detachment of combat engineers, and a reconnaissance platoon from the 614th Tank Destroyer Battalion. The mission of the task force was to break through the Seigfried Line and move on to the Rhine River. The operation took nearly twenty-seven hours to complete. On March 23d, the 14th Armored Division passed through the hole that was created by the task force. By the end of the battle, the task force had captured seven Siegfried towns; destroyed a large number of enemy equipment, forty-nine machine gun nests, and twenty-nine antitank guns; and killed 833 Germans while capturing over 3000 Germans.

Task Force Rhine was like one of those story book thrillers. Roaring through the black night, along precipices that towered out over abrupt mountain drops of one to two thousand feet, with all guns belching death at the hidden enemy, and braving the hail of fire that came from the formidable Siegfried Line pill-boxes, it fought its way through the whole Seigfried in three days, with those brave colored veterans leading the way. And the support which was due to have been provided by the Tenth Armored Division, and the 36th Texas Division

did not come so these various had to do it all by themselves. Death and destruction lay behind Task Force Rhine, scattered all over its path. And when other American troops came through later, they asked this question: "WHAT ARMORED DIVISION WENT THROUGH HERE?" The answer: "The 761st Tank Battalion!" - That was "Task Force Rhine!"<sup>21</sup>

On March 30th, the battalion departed from Insheim and joined the 71st Infantry Division in Langenselbold, Germany. The battalion had to travel 132 miles arriving to the division on April 1st. Companies A, B, and C were attached to the 5th, 14th, and 66th Infantry Regiments respectively.

The 761st's first contact with the enemy after rejoining Third Army was in the vicinity of Rodalback. In this area, the battalion encountered elements of the German 6th SS Mountain Division, Nord. The 6th SS Division was attempting a breakout through XII Corps forces. Initial contact with the 6th SS was by the 14th Infantry Regiment. As the 71st Division conducted its encirclement of the 6th SS Division, they found the Germans holding their ground and not showing resistance. On April 3d, the entire 6th SS division was destroyed.

The battalion captured the towns of Hildberghausen, Herbertsdorf, Eishausen, and Oberlautern as it was moving towards Fulda heading for the town of Coburg. The battalion took Coburg on April 12th. For the next couple of days, the battalion fought its way through the town Kulmbach where enemy resistance was intensively high. The attack on Kulmbach ended with the German commander surrendering to the 71st Division.

After crossing the Danube River on April 27th, the battalion captured the town of Regensburg. This town was a key military center for German forces in their southeast region. It was considered a strategic strong point, with channels running out to other posts, and a good highway network for conducting resupply operations.

The German commander of Regensburg was given an ultimatum by Eisenhower to surrender. The ultimatum was for the German commander to

sign the surrender declaration or he would close the entire western front to prevent any Germans from crossing American lines. The commander rejected the ultimatum. Under the hours of darkness, the 761st moved into firing positions as did the division artillery. Just before daybreak, both the 761st and the artillery unit began shelling the town. Once again, another German town was captured. During this operation, the 761st captured over 500 prisoners.

During the first week of April, Allied forces moved out from the Rhine River. The 761st spearheading for the Third Army's 71st Division, moved into Austria. The battalion captured town after town and positioned along the Enns River on May 2nd. The 71st Division had great success crossing the river. After the river crossing operation, the battalion pushed into Austria. This was the sixth major campaign in the European Theater for the battalion. The battalion was covering territory so quickly that the supply trains were two days behind. The battalion was out of food and had to rely on eating fish that they caught from the river.

On May 5th, the battalion swiftly moved along the Vienna-Salzburg highway towards the town of Wel. During this operation, Company C blasted a Luftwaffe air base. They blew up the aircraft hangers and killed pilots while they were sitting in their cockpits attempting to take off.

Upon penetrating through the town of Wel, the battalion continued south toward Steyr. Company A completely destroyed the Wehrmacht forces in little time. Over 3,000 German soldiers gave up and surrendered. In addition, the battalion destroyed two Mark IV tanks and twenty machine-gun emplacements, while killing four hundred enemy soldiers. Since the entry into Austria, rumors had run through the battalion that their objective was to rendezvous with Red Army units that had swept through

Czechoslovakia. Now the 761st received the official word: "You will advance to the Enns River, and you will wait there for the Russians."<sup>22</sup>

Lieutenant Colonel Bates, while in Austria, wrote a letter to the officers and enlisted men of the 761st:

You have fought gallantly in all extremes of climate and terrain . . . [that] have all caused you intense discomfort and greatly tried your ingenuity and ability. . . . You have met every type of equipment in the German Army. . . . All have hurt you. All have destroyed some of your equipment. But all are behind you, useless, the German soldier defeated, his politician silent, and you are victorious!<sup>23</sup>.

On May 5th, the 761st occupied positions along the Enn River. Their mission was to wait and make contact with the Russian troops. On the next day, Company A rolled their tanks into Steyr and there were no Russian soldiers insight. Shortly afterwards, the company crossed a bridge into Russian territory and later returned without making contact. The last combat mission for the battalion was over.

After traveling nearly 2,000 miles and fighting continuously for 183 days, the tired men of the 761st could finally rest.<sup>24</sup>

After departing Austria, the battalion returned to Bissengen, Germany, to conduct peacetime operations. The battalion remained there until August 2d when it moved to Teisendorf, Bavaria. At this point, the unit began to break up with soldiers returning back to the United States. Lieutenant Colonel Bates remained the battalion commander until November of that year. He relinquished his command to Captain Ivan Harrison who became the first African American commander for the battalion.

The 761st Tank Battalion fought courageously in the European Theater for 183 days. During this time, there were six battlefield commissions. Remarkably, the battalion lost only thirty-four men, but there were many soldiers wounded.

The 761st was inactivated on June 1, 1946 in Germany. A year and a half later, November 24, 1947, the battalion was assigned to the

regular Army at Fort Knox, Kentucky. Finally, the battalion was inactivated for the last time March 15, 1955.

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<sup>1</sup>Trezzvant W. Anderson, Come Out Fighting, The Epic Tale of the 761st Tank Battalion in 1942-1945 (Salzburger Druckerei Und Verlag), 17.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., 17.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., 23.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., 21.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., 25.

<sup>6</sup>Lou Potter, Liberators, (Orlando, FL: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich Publishers, 1992), 172.

<sup>7</sup>Mary Molley, The Invisible Soldier, (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press), 152.

<sup>8</sup>Kathryn Browne Pfeifer, The 761st Tank Battalion, (Twenty-First Century Books, 1994), 45.

<sup>9</sup>Anderson, Come Out Fighting, 36.

<sup>10</sup>Potter, Liberators, 179.

<sup>11</sup>761st Tank Battalion, After Action Report, 2 December 1944, 4.

<sup>12</sup>Potter, Liberators, 182.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., 182.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., 182.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., 186.

<sup>16</sup>Anderson, Come Out Fighting, 50.

<sup>17</sup>Potter, Liberators, 182.

<sup>18</sup>Major Bruce Alsup, "Initiative: The Chance Seizure of the Ramagen Bridge Over the Rhine," Combined Arms in Battle Since 1939, ed., Roger J. Spiller, 140.

<sup>19</sup>Ulyssess Lee, The Employment of Negro Troops, (Washington, DC: Center of Military History, United States Army), 57.

<sup>20</sup>Anderson, Come Out Fishing, 65.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid., 67.

<sup>22</sup>Potter, Liberators, 247.

<sup>23</sup>Pfeifer, The 761st Tank Battalion, 69.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid., 65.

## CHAPTER 4

### PERSONAL ACCOUNTS

This chapter is based on personal experiences from soldiers that actually served in the 761st Tank Battalion during the European Campaigns. In this chapter a series of questions were presented to twenty veterans. Of the twenty, nine (45 percent) provided comments. One thing that must be kept in perspective is the age and health of these veterans. Some of the questions were:

1. Where did you enlist in the military?
2. Where did you receive your initial training? If you trained at Camp Hood, Texas, what was one thing that you remembered most about the German Prisoners of War who were there?
3. What is your most vivid memory about your commander?
4. If you were assigned to Camp Hood, what do you recall about the city of Killeen?
5. Briefly describe the one thing that you remembered most about the Battle of the Bulge?
6. What do you remember most about your combat experience?
7. How long did you stay in the military?
8. How did you feel when you returned home?
9. If there was one thing that you could change regarding the treatment of African American servicemen during World War II, what would it be?
10. What did you dislike most about serving during World War II?



11. What did you enjoy most about serving during World War II?

The nine veterans that responded provided interesting and enlightening data on their experiences during World War II.

As far as the place of enlistment, of the nine veterans only one enlisted in the South, at Port St. Joe, Florida. The others enlisted in the North and Midwest; Detroit, Michigan; Columbus, Ohio; Springfield, Ohio; Chicago, Illinois; Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania; Harrisburg, Pennsylvania; and two in Leavenworth, Kansas. For the most part, the geographical location for enlistment was in the North and Midwest. One of the main reasons African Americans from the South did not enlist in armored units was because of the initial entry test that they could not pass. African Americans in the North and other regions of the U.S. scored higher on the test than the ones from the South

All of the soldiers that were assigned to the battalion did not receive Armored training at Fort Knox, Kentucky. Most of the individuals received their basic training at Camp Claiborne, Louisiana. Those that did not receive advanced armored training at Fort Knox, received the training upon arriving to Camp Hood. In addition to the basic armored training course at Fort Knox, some had the opportunity to attend the Basic Communication/Radio Operator course. One soldier stated that he inprocessed at Fort Meade, Maryland, and was transferred directly to Camp Claiborne where he received his basic armored training. A general consensus is that basic training was conducted at a variety of locations while the formal advanced course was given at Fort Knox and Camp Hood.

While at Camp Hood, Texas, soldiers believed that the German Prisoners of War (POWs) were treated better than they were. It was stated that black soldiers of the 761st Tank Battalion were frequently assigned as guards over the German POWs on work detail. They were responsible for ensuring that the German POWs did not get out of control

or escape the camp. Yet, the POWs had more rights and freedom than the African American soldiers who were American citizens serving in the U.S. Army. The German POW's could use the work-area latrines, go to the white Post Exchange, attend dances, and go to the theater, clubs, picnics, and churches. The African American tankers were not allowed to do those things. The POWs were provided opportunities that were denied to African American soldiers. They had better living conditions, more social activities, and even shared the same latrine as white soldiers. These were forbidden for African American soldiers. They had to use separate latrines, attend separate churches and clubs. "Uppermost, the Germany POW's were white and we U.S. Black tankers were undesirable, unwanted, unappreciated (Sona Non Grata)-----Niggers."<sup>1</sup> Overall, African American soldiers felt as they were the POW's while assigned at Camp Hood.

The most memorable moment during combat for most of the veterans was the landing of the 761st Tank Battalion into the European Theater. This was the first time that these African America tankers had ever been on foreign soil. One soldier noted that his first day in combat was as he stated "the terrible slaughter which occurred on November 8, 1944 at Vic-Sur-Seille. The unexplained departure of Major Charles M. Wingo the Battalion Executive Officer, and being bombed and strafed by Germans."<sup>2</sup>

For the most part, these veterans were truly dedicated to serve in the military for both their rights as a U.S. citizen and as a soldier for their country. They entered the Army for a number of reasons. Some came because of pride and dedication while others entered so that they could make a honest living and have money once they returned home. The majority of the soldiers spent between two and five years in the Army. Some managed to remain in the Army for twenty or more years despite of the hatred and prejudiced they encountered.

When the soldiers reflected back on some of their vivid memories, most noted the outstanding soldiers and leaders that were a part of the unit, individuals such as Ivan H. "Court Martial Slim" Harrison, Charles A "Pop"Gates, and Irvin "the Burner" McHerny. Each were described as intelligent, professional, competent, disciplinarians, outstanding leaders, and tacticians. The battalion commander Lieutenant Colonel Bates was known for treating each soldier as a soldier. He was the cornerstone of the unit. He was more concerned about the job that you did and not about the color of your skin. Each soldier in the battalion was treated fairly and with respect by the leadership. For the most part, the unit had outstanding leaders that cared for their soldiers.

The veterans had mixed feelings upon returning to the United States after the war. Some of the veterans stated that they were just glad to back and that the war was over. They felt relieved and blessed to be alive and to have been spared to see and do so much. One veteran stated that his best bet was not to get out of the Army because of the job security and benefits. He ended up serving twenty-two years in the military. Yet another veteran was quoted saying "He felt elated and thankful but immediately utterly disgusted."<sup>3</sup> He arrived in New York City, New York, on Christmas Day at 1500 hours. He did not make it to his hometown, Springfield, Ohio, until December 29, 1945, the day of his birthday. He returned back to the European Theater to join the 761st Tank battalion on April 1, 1946. He stated that the bigotry, segregation, and racism was so rampant and overt that he would never return back to the United States. They all were proud to have served and fight for their country.

If the veterans could change one aspect of fighting during World War II, it would relate to racism and the problems that they encounter not only in the military but in the civilian sector as well. They wanted to be treated fairly not just in the 761st Tank Battalion but in

life as a whole. One veteran stated that he wished that they had taken down the barrier wall between blacks and whites. He stated that people as a whole, not just soldiers should have been treated equally. One veteran stated that there should have been equal rights on the forts and public buses and protection by the government for their soldiers in the cities. Another veteran comment was to totally eliminate segregation. The government should enforce strict enforcement of equal opportunity and affirmative action in recruitment, assignment, training, access, accommodation, recognition, promotion, and treatment of black servicemen and women as American citizens. They should have full entitlement and enjoyment and protection under the Constitution of the United States of America. Bottom line, they wanted to be treated equally with respect.

Young African Americans should listen to the message presented by these veterans. They stressed that young African Americans of today are different than in the past. The doors are open, and they should take full advantage of the opportunities before them. They should try and learn all they can through education from grade school through college. Young African Americans should make a positive name for themselves and be good U.S. citizen. Do not be afraid of standing up for what you invision is right. They should study, be inquisitive, and teach others; strive for excellence; be honest, truthful, and helpful to others; remain drug free; demand their rights and justice under the Constitution of the United States of America; always think positive; and present a high profile. They should join the NAACP, the Urban League Fraternal Organization, and political party of their choice. "They should vote-vote-vote for positive and constructive change [Democracy]."<sup>4</sup>

There were many things that the veterans disliked about serving in World War II. They regretted being away from home for such a long time. They really did not appreciate the segregation, racism, and the double standards. One veteran stated that he hated "being rejected on their

initial assignments."<sup>5</sup> Then after the Germans proved their ability to stop the U.S. Infantry attacks our tanks were called to assist and thereafter to spearhead all movements and attacks and never given a rest period from the front line action."<sup>6</sup> Another veteran stated that he dislike being sent to southern bases for basic and combat training. There were two traumatic experiences of life regimentation and life in the south for African Americans. Yet another veteran stated that there was not anything that he did not like. He went to a fine unit, and he had some really good men and officers. They taught him a lot about life and the Army. The Army made a man out of him and the life to come.

Some of the veterans did enjoy their tour during World War II. They appreciated being able to travel and do some site seeing in a foreign country. It was stated that the travel exposure to European culture was enlightening, educational, inspirational, developmental, and motivational. They liked the high morale and esprit de corps with the dual purpose of "Come-Out-Fighting" attitude. They enjoyed meeting new people and sharing different ideas from one another. One veteran highlighted that he enjoyed the bond of friendship and solidarity among others. He also stated that there was a genuine respect for each other and the cooperation between the officers (both black and white and the enlisted men of the 761st Tank Battalion.) Lastly, one veteran shared that he enjoyed convincing the U.S. Army and the world that the Negro was capable of doing a very respectful job as a combatant on the front line.

The veterans were proud to comment on their personal experiences during World War II. They were fortunate to have served efficiently against the well-prepared German forces during World War II. They proved to all that the African Americans can do their job as demonstrated by the 761st Tank Battalion. As described by one of the serving members, he was unhappy to be taken from the civilian life and

drafted into the U.S. Army. However, when he arrived at Camp Claiborne, Louisiana, assigned to the 761st Tank Battalion, his interest and enthusiasm rose. He had never been South, but he had heard stories about life in the South and how blacks were treated. He managed to stay out of trouble and took his training seriously. He loved the tank maneuver training. He stated that it was adventurous and something that he had never dreamed of doing. He later stated that the unit was finally approved for combat duty, but no one really expected that the 761st was going to be committed into combat. The saddest day of his life was the day his tank was knocked out at Tillet killing his driver. He described the rest of the war as being one big nightmare. He noted the unit made its presence. "SGT Rueben Rivers was my platoon sergeant, need I say more."<sup>7</sup>

The last veteran stated that he and all of the communications section should have been awarded the Bronze Star Medal. They kept lines of communication open and operating most efficiently twenty-four hours a day under adverse conditions. For 183 consecutive days, through his own initiative, he displayed signal panels to indicate the front line during bombing and strafing runs by U.S. aircraft on their position. He feels that Trezzvant W. Anderson, the War Department correspondent, should have been awarded the Bronze Star Medal. He wished that there had been five Trezzvant W. Anderson to document the World War II record of the 761st Tank Battalion.

In conclusion, all of the veterans that provided comments were proud and honored to have served in the military during a time of racial differences among both races. Their primary goal was to make a difference and help pave the way for other African Americans to have better opportunities than in the past. Even though racism, hatred, and prejudice is still in the military, it is not like it was as described by the veterans. If it had not been for them willing to stand up and

demonstrate their talents, African Americans would not be where we are today. Taking into account the severity of discrimination among African Americans in the past, I believe, based on comments from veterans, that America has made great leaps and bounds towards a more balance society. Yes, there is still much need for improvement in the area of discrimination for the American people, however, tremendous progress has been made.

In analyzing comments from veterans of the 761st Tank Battalion experiences during WWII, these individuals traveled down a long dark path towards success. As indicated by the veterans, success can be defined using many definitions. Some described their success as a method of paving the way for other African Americans while other described success as breaking the color barrier which allowed African American soldiers to fight on the front line. No matter how success is viewed or measured, it can be noted that the veterans of the 761st Tank Battalion was successful in their endeavors.

I feel a very strong pride in the battalion because it has been noted that the brave soldiers of the 761st Tank Battalion never gave up. They kept pushing forward despite the negative odds, discrimination, and racism placed upon them. These soldiers were treated horrible as were most African Americans in uniform during this period. They lived in a segregated area in base camps. They could not eat at certain specified locations or enjoy recreation at certain places because of post and unit regulations. In some cases, soldiers were not allow to visit friends in nearby camps. Under pain of disciplinary action they had to swallow daily insults by white civilians, soldiers, and officers in fear of severe punishment. Upon arriving in camps, African American soldiers found themselves frequently in isolated stations, far from the other soldiers. They found separate buses for colored, separate candy and cigarette counters, and separate movie theaters. They found that their

behavior off post was supervised by white military police, and that even after some details of African American military police were established, these individuals were not armed and were restricted in their authority. Worst of all, it has been characterized that our troops and our civilians discovered to their dismay that the United States Army, mightiest force of the land, had meekly surrendered control over its African American soldiers to any white sheriff, mayor or local government official who wanted control of them.

In comparing today's Army with events that occurred during WWII as it was described by the veterans, African American soldiers in today's army are blessed not to be confronted with the problems of the past. African American soldiers of today are not treated nearly as bad as the African American soldiers were treated in the 761st Tank Battalion. African American soldiers in today's Army have a voice and rights that did not exist in the past. They can attend the Officers and Noncommissioned Officer's clubs. African American soldiers no longer have to ride in the back of the bus, use separate latrines or drink from separate water fountains.

Consequently, all of these positive changes for African American soldiers in the military were at the expense of some brave, courageous, African American soldiers of the past.

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<sup>1</sup>Caldwell, James Sergeant (Retired). Former member of the 761st Tank Battalion. Questionnaire, Ft. Leavenworth, KS, 1 Nov 96.

<sup>2</sup>Caldwell.

<sup>3</sup>Caldwell.

<sup>4</sup>Caldwell.

<sup>5</sup>Gates, Charles A. Lieutenant Colonel (Retired). Former member of the 761st Tank Battalion. Questionnaire, Ft. Leavenworth, KS, 1 Nov 96..

<sup>6</sup>Gates.



<sup>7</sup>Murphy, Paul H. Sergeant. Former member of the 761st Tank Battalion. Questionnaire, Ft. Leavenworth, KS, 1 Nov 96.

## CHAPTER 5

### CONCLUSION

In analyzing African Americans and the role that they played during World War II, fair treatment among races was not evident. Soldiers were treated as second class citizens during World War II. They had to fight two battles. The main battle, which in some aspects is still a battle today, was racism. African Americans' as a whole had little or no rights. Their education was limited, and job opportunities were poor. The next battle was in the European Theater against a well-trained German Army.

Most African Americans entered into the military because civilian employment for them was not available. Others entered because of pride, dedication, and moral principles to fight for their country. In the civilian sector, they had to except low-paying, second-hand jobs even if they had the education, training, and skills to do the job. They wanted to play a significant part and vital role in building a great nation. Many were willing and eventually sacrificed their lives in combat.

African American soldiers during World War II were, for the most part, faceless supporters of America's war effort, at least before they fought hard and made an impressive name for themselves. Initially, they were the supplyman, the ammunition handler, and the engineer. Very few were afforded the opportunity to serve as an infantryman, artilleryman, or a tanker. It took a lot for America to accept the fact that African Americans, once given the opportunity, could produce effectively on the

battlefield and not just in a support role. During the World War II era, African Americans were faced with two battles: one on the home front and the other abroad. The most difficult challenge was convincing government and military leaders that they were capable to fight. The road to war was not easy for African Americans. But through dedication, determination, and not giving up, they were able to make a positive impact on society.

In the early 1900s, African American soldiers in the 9th and 10th cavalry served well in battles. Some of those same soldiers received credit for establishing an outstanding unit, the 761st Tank Battalion. Some actually served as members of the battalion. They went from riding the back of a horse to riding inside of a tank.

Documents and records indicate that the 761st Tank Battalion was indeed a successful unit. Even with the racial obstacles they had to hurdle, they were able to overcome and look beyond personal feelings. However, racial tension presented problems at times, but it did not completely stop them from training hard and becoming productive in battle. In Camp Claiborne, Louisiana, and Camp Hood, Texas, discriminatory attitudes existed among African American soldiers both on and off post. That made training even that more difficult.

The battalion was fortunate to have outstanding leaders. Initially all of the leadership in the battalion were white. At first, this was perceived to be a problem for the soldiers. After adjusting to the white officers, the soldiers knew that they were among outstanding leaders who treated all soldiers the same, no matter the color of their skin. Eventually, the battalion received several African American officers who proved themselves to be outstanding leaders, planners, and tacticians. Once they arrived to the unit's location the attitude among soldiers became even better. They felt that by having African American leaders in the unit that their voice would be heard and issues solved.

Trust and honesty was exercised from the top down. Lieutenant Colonel Bates believed in centralized planning and decentralized execution. He allowed for honest mistakes and defended his soldiers when called upon. He was viewed as a father by the soldiers. He slept as they slept, ate as they ate, and walked as they walked. Those qualities is one of the reasons why the unit was successful, on and off the battlefield.

The 761st Tank Battalion was indeed a battalion known for its motto "Come Out Fighting." The battalion fought nonstop under severe weather conditions for an incredible 183 days. This was during the time when the average life span of a tank battalion was only ten to fifteen days. The 761st Tank Battalion faced and in most cases defeated the enemy in four major allied campaigns through six European countries: France, Holland, Luxembourg, Belgium, German, and Austria. The battalion supported many of General George Patton's units, such as, 26th, 71st, 79th, 87th, 95th, and 103rd Infantry Divisions as well as the 17th Airborne Divisions and the 7th and 9th Armies. The battalion was a first-rate unit of highest quality and morale. They performed beyond the expectations of many high-ranking officers and leaders. Those who did not believe that African-American soldiers were ready for combat. General Patton told the men in the battalion that had they not been good, he would never have asked for them. He told them that he had only the best in this Army. The 761st Tank Battalion proved that they ranked as one of the best if not the best tank battalion during World War II.

Despite the rampant segregation and racism of the times, the battalion managed to compile quite an impressive record. Members of the battalion received 11 Silver Stars, 70 Bronze Star (4 with clusters), 296 Purple Hearts (8 with clusters), 4 Campaign Battle Stars, 3 Certificates of Merit, 8 Battlefield Commissions, and most recently, 1 Congressional Medal of Honor.

During World War II, 433 Medals of Honor were awarded to soldiers. Not one of those soldiers that received a medal was an African American. It was not until January 13, 1997, when President Bill Clinton awarded seven African Americans with the Medal of Honor with one being Staff Sergeant Reuben Rivers. Sergeant Rivers, who was a platoon sergeant in the 761st Tank Battalion, was injured so severely that his commander ordered him to be evacuated. Sergeant Rivers not only refused to abandon his battalion, but also refused morphine to kill the pain because he wanted to remain alert. He fought for two days in an intense battle and was killed in the line of duty on November 19, 1944, in Guebling, France, trying to destroy German antitank positions that were firing on his company. President Clinton stated "no black soldier who deserved the medal in the war received it, but these seven are finally getting the tribute that has always been their due."<sup>1</sup>

Even though little is known about the 761st Tank Battalion, it is definitely a part of U.S. history. Because of people like Beverly Taylor of Copperas Cove, Texas, the unit will remain alive and never be forgotten. In the past five years she has placed the unit in the spot light among others units. During this time, she has been the driving force in renaming two streets "761st Tank Battalion Boulevard" in honoring of the battalion, one on Fort Hood proper and the other in the Killeen community. A place where fifty years ago African Americans were not allowed to go. She is also in the process of raising funds to have a monument placed on Fort Hood representing soldiers of the 761st Tank Battalion. The monument will portray the image of one enlisted soldier, one black officer, and one white officer with the white officer positioned in the middle. The monument will symbolize unity within the battalion among African Americans and whites and also officers and enlisted soldiers. The project is expected to be completed in the Spring of 1998. Mrs. Taylor stated:

The construction of the 761st Tank Battalion Memorial Monument will take place in the vicinity of Fort Hood's main gate entrance. This memorial will be constructed in bronze and polished granite by the famed and extremely talented sculptor and noted historian Eddie Dixon. Mr. Dixon's many works include the Buffalo Soldier Monument which stands at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. The 761st memorial promises to be of inspirational value to all Americans, young and old, military and civilian.<sup>2</sup>

Finally, as presented in this thesis and demonstrated within the 761st Tank Battalion, World War II brought a large number of African Americans and whites together. Even though there were many instances of friction and violence, African Americans were persistent in joining the rest of America in the fight for democracy. For African American soldiers, especially the ones who served diligently in the 761st Tank Battalion, the Army continued to be looked upon both as an arena in which they could prove themselves and make a difference in America society. In summary, despite the burden of discrimination, soldiers in the battalion proved their proficiency as fighters and demonstrated that their race was capable of fighting and surviving on the battlefield. As a result, the war produced thousands of African American veterans who returned home with a new concept of what life should be like for American people as a whole.

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<sup>1</sup>USA Today, p 6A, 14 Jan 97.

<sup>2</sup>Beverly Taylor, Chairperson & President 761st Tank Battalion Monument Memorial Committee. Note to Major Craig A. Trice, October 1996.

APPENDIX

WAR DEPARTMENT  
Washington 25, D.C., 18 November 1944

Table of Organization and Equipment  
No. 17-15

TANK BATTALION

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Tank Battalion  
Section I  
Organization  
A. Tank Battalion

	HHC	3 Med Tank Co	Light Tank Co	Service Co	Total	Med Attach	Aggre	Enl Cadre
LTC	1				1		1	
MAJ	2				2		2	
CPT	4	1	1	2	10		2	
CPT or 1st LT						2	2	
1st LT	3	2	2	1	12		12	
Total Comm	13	5	5	4	37	2	39	
WO				3	3		3	
MSGT	1			1	1		1	1
1SGT	1	1	1	1	6		6	6
TSGT	3	1	1	3	10		10	10
SSG	6	5	5	6	32	1	33	30
SGT	11	12	11	2	60		60	40
CPL	11	20	2	2	75	1	76	6
TECH3						1	1	
TECH4	12	15	14	18	89	1	90	18
TECH5	24	14	14	35	115	3	118	2
PFC	26	19	18	17	118	5	123	
PVT	32	25	23	23	153	6	159	
BASIC	(6)	(6)	(5)	(6)	(35)	(1)	(36)	
Tot ENL	127	112	89	108	660	18	678	114



	HHC	3 Med Tank Co 1	Light Tank Co 1	Servic e Co	Total	Med Attach	Aggre	Enl Cadre
Car 1/2 trac k wo arm	8	1	1	1	13		12	
Carb ine 30 cal	70	25	24	71	210		240	
Carrie r 81mm	3				3		3	
Gun, Mach, 30 cal	3			9	12		12	
Gun, Mach, 50 cal	5	1	2	10	29		20	
Gun, Submach 45 cal	47	92	70	44	437		437	
Launch er rocket	12	3	2	12	35		35	
Pistol, 45 cal	3				3		3	
Rifle, 30 cal	20				20		20	
Tank, light			17		17		17	
Tank, med	2	17			53		53	
Tank, med, 105mm	3	1			6		6	
Trailer , 10	4			13	17		17	
Trailer , 1-ton	2	1	1	20	26		26	

Truck, 1/4 ton	11	2	2	3	22	4	26
Truck, 3/4 ton						1	1
Truck, 3/4 ton						1	1
Truck, 3/4 Carrier				2	2	1	3
Truck, 2 1/2 ton	1	1	1	34	39		39
Vehicle , Tank Rec, M32		1		2	5		5
Vehicle Tank Rec, Light			1		1		1

Tank Battalion  
Medical Detachment, Tank Battalion

	Total	Enlisted Cadre
Captain of first lieutenant	2	
General duty	(2)	
Total commissioned	2	
Staff Sergeant	1	1
Medical	(1)	(1)
Corporal	1	
Medical	1	
Technician, grade 3	1	1
Technician, grade 4	1	
Technician, grade 5	3	
Private, first class	5	
Private	6	
Driver, ambulance	(1)	
Driver, truck, light	(1)	
Litter bearer	(6)	
Technician, medical	(1)	
Technician, surgical	(1)	(1)
Technician, surgical	(1)	
Technician, surgical	(1)	
Technician, surgical	(b2)	
Technician, surgical	(b2)	
Basic	(1)	
Total Enlisted	18	2

Aggregate	20	2
Truck, 1/4-ton	4	
Truck, 3/4-ton ambulance KD	1	
Truck, weapons carrier	1	

Tank Battalion  
Chemical

Item	Allowances	Basis of Dist & Remarks
Apparatus, decon, 1 1/2-qt capacity, M2	6	1 per trk outside continental US when auth by theater of opr comdr
Mask, gas service, combat, M5-11-7	20	1 per indiv (mask, gas, sv, light-weight, M3-10A1-6 or M3A1-10A1-6 or mask, gas, sv, will be issued in lieu thereof as dir by WD)
Respirator, dust, M2	20	1 per indiv (respirator, dust, M1 will be issued in lieu thereof until exhausted

Engineer

Compass, wrist, liquid filled	3	1 per off; a sgt
Lamp, electric, portable, command post	1	1 per tent, CP
Net, camouflage, cotton, shrimp: 22 x 22-ft	4	1 per trk, 1/4-ton
29 x 29-ft	2	1 per trk, 3/4-ton
Template, map, plastic, transparent, M2	2	1 per off

Medical  
Individual Equipment

Brassard, Geneva Convention	20	1 per indiv outside continental US when auth by theater of opr comdr
Kit, Medical: Noncommissioned officers	9	1 per ssgt; epl; techn, med; techn, surg
Officers	2	1 per off
Privates	9	1 per driver; litter bearer; basic

# Organizational Equipment

Item	Allowances	Basis of Dist & Remarks
Blanket set, small	4	1 per trk, 3/4-ton; 2 per det
Carrier, litter, for truck, 1/4-ton, 4 X 4	4	1 per trk, 1/4-ton
Case, utility, canvas, empty	1	
Chest, MD:		
No. 1	1	
No. 2	1	
No. 4	1	
Kit, first aid, motor vehicle, 12-unit	6	1 per trk
Litter, straight, aluminum	18	4 per trk, 3/4-ton; 10 add per det (litter, straight, steel will be issued in lieu thereof until exhausted)
Machine , imprinting	2	

## Ordnance Weapons and miscellaneous

Binocular, M17	1	SNL F-210
Watch, wrist: 7-jewel	1	1 per ssgt (watch, wrist, 15 or more jewels may be issued in lieu thereof: SNL F-36)
15 or more jewels	2	1 per off outside continental US when auth by theater of opr comdr (SNL F-36)

## Vehicles

Truck:	4	SNL G-503
1/4-ton, 4 X 4		
3/4-ton, 4 X 4, ambulance, KD	1	SNL G-502
3/4-ton, 4 X 4, weapons carrier	1	SNL G-502

### Motor Transport Equipment

Item	Allowances	Basis of Dist & Remarks
Axe, handled, chopping, single-bit, standard grade, 4-lb	6	1 per trk (SNL J-6)
Defroster and deicer, electric, windshield	6	1 per trk when auth by army comdr; outside continental US when auth by theater of opr comdr
Mattock, handled, pick, type II, class F, 5-lb	2	1 per trk, 3/4-ton (SNL J-6)
Rope, two, 20-ft long, 1-in diameter	6	1 per trk (SNL, H-9)
Shovel, general purpose, D-handled, strapback, round point, No. 2	6	1 per trk (SNL, J-6)

### Quartermaster Organizational clothing

Bag, canvas, field, od, M1936	20	1 per indiv
Belt, pistol or revolve, M1936	20	Do
Cover, canteen, mounted, M1941	20	Do
Strap, carrying, general purpose	20	1 per bag, canvas, fld (strap, carrying, bag, canvas, fld, od, M1936 will be issued in lieu thereof until exhausted
Suspenders, belt, M1936	2	1 per off

### Tank Battalion Organizational Equipment

Item	Allowances	Basis of Dist & Remarks
Axe, intrenching, M1910, with-handle	2	1 per 10 EM
Bag: Canvas, water sterilizing, porous, complete with-cover-and-hanger	1	Bag, canvas, water sterilizing, porous, complete w/cover and hanger will be issued in lieu thereof until exhausted

Item	Allowances	Basis of Dist & Remarks
Delousing	1	1 per 20 indiv or maj fraction thereof in areas where louse-borne typhus is high when auth by the WD
	or	
	1	1 per 35 indiv or maj fraction thereof in areas where louse-borne typhus is low when auth by the WD
Bucket:	6	1 per trk
Canvas, water, 18-qt		
General-purpose, galvanized, heavy-weight, without-lip, 14-qt. capacity	2	
Burner, oil, stove, tent, M1941	1	1 per stove, tent, M1941, when auth by WD
Can, water, 5-gallon	6	1 per 5 indiv or fraction thereof; 2 add per det
Carrier:	2	1 per axe, intrenching
Axe, intrenching, M1910		
Pick-mattock, intrenching M1910	4	1 per pick-mattock, intrenching
Shovel, intrenching, M1943	12 or	7 per 10 EM
	14	7 per 10 EM; 1 per off; outside continental US when auth by theater of opr comdr (carr, shovel, intrenching, M1910 will be issued when shovel, intrenching, M1919 is issued)
Wire cutter, M1938	2	1 per cutter, wire
Case, canvas, dispatch	2	1 per off
Clipper, hair	1	1 per 30 indiv or maj fraction thereof operating in extremely cold areas when auth by army comdr; outside continental US when auth by theater of opr comdr
Cutter, wire, M1938	2	1 per trk, 3/4-ton

Drum, gasoline, 5 gallon	8	1 per trk, 1/4-ton; 2 per trk, 3/4-ton
Flag: Geneva-Convention, Red-Cross bunting, ambulance-and-marker,	7	1 per trk; 1 add per det
Guidon, bunting	1	
Goggles, M1941	20	1 per indiv
Kit, sewing	2	1 per 12 EM or maj fraction thereof
Outfit, cooking, 1-burner	6	1 per trk
Pickmattock, intrenching, M1910, with-handle	4	2 per 10 EM

#### Tank Battalion

Shovel, intrenching, M1943	12 or 14	7 per 10 EM  7 per 10 EM; 1 per off; outside continental US when auth by theater of opr comdr (shovel, intrenching, M1910, will be issued in lieu thereof until exhausted)
Stove, tent, M1941, complete	1	1 per tent, CP when auth by army comdr; outside continental US when auth by theater of opr comdr
Tent, command post, complete with-pins-and-poles	1	
Tube, flexible-nozzle	6	1 per trk
Whistle, thunderer	2	1 per det comdr, ssgt

	Signal	
Flag Set M-238	6	1 per trk
Flashlight TL-122-( )	12	1 per rad set; off; a sgt; epl; trk; med chest, No. 2
Lantern MX-290/GV	2	Lantern, electric portable, hand, will be issued in lieu thereof until exhausted
Radio Set SCR-510-( )	1	Mtd in trk, 1/4-ton



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